

Shatter: Pirouette in the Dark {Part I} by midas_touch_of_angst

Series: Shatter (Stranger Things) [1]

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Action/Adventure, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Modern Setting, Alternate Universe - Modern with Magic, Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, F/M, Flashbacks, Gen, Okay SO quick head's up, Origin Story, Panic Attacks, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD, Superheroes, okay now for some more warnings:, so just know that going in, there aren't any super graphic depictions of violence but there is a LOT of fighting/action, vigilantes

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Kali Prasad, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Kali Prasad, Eleven & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Steve Harrington, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Maxine "Max" Mayfield & Mike Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair, Steve Harrington & Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington/Nancy Wheeler, Will Byers & Kali Prasad, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, maybe some Stony in the future??? idk we'll see where this goes, mentioned but not focused on relationships include:

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Summary:

Mike expected to learn a bit more about the superpowers that seemed to be popping up around town by spying on the creepy Lab in the woods. What he did not expect was to end up hiding a fugitive "powered" girl, or to find out that his friends were running around being vigilantes, or to end up hiding from the government. And he definitely didn't expect to form a Party of Superheroes.

Superhero AU, Part one of a three-part series.

Part II {Spiral Into the Unknown}: https://archiveofourown.org/works/14069421?view_full_work=true

Part III {Break the Glass}: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/14340432/chapters/33096699>

Rated Teen and Up for Swearing and violence.

1. Eight's Escape Attempt does not go as Planned

Notes for the Chapter:

I have a couple of notes at the end of the Chapter, but here's a quick Head's Up: while most of my fics tend to follow the vocabulary of the source material (SU fics have no cursing, for example), for certain reasons in this fic, I'm allowing myself to use the f-bomb, which is like, the only swear word not actually used in "Stranger Things" canon. So you're going to be seeing a lot of that.

CHAPTER ONE

Eight's Escape Attempt does not go as Planned

It was a cold November day when Eleven finally escaped.

She hadn't planned it, of course. She never planned to run away from her Lab; the thought rarely crossed her mind. She'd never even been outside, so how was she to know that the outside world wasn't just more prodding and testing? In fact, she'd been encouraged in that way of thought; Papa constantly told her that the people outside the Lab hated people like her, wanted to kill her, and the Doctors were the only ones who cared about her. The Doctors... and her siblings.

She barely interacted with any of them, really. She only saw them on occasion, when there was an emergency and they were thrown into the same room. They didn't talk, but they sometimes played games or tested their powers. The one she remembered best was Eight. They'd been together the longest, having been put in the same playroom often when they were younger. Eleven was the first one that Eight revealed her powers to, aside from the Doctors. But she hadn't seen Eight in years, had simply been told that she was gone.

So it was a complete surprise when Eleven was shaken awake, and she opened her eyes to see Eight standing over her.

She looked a lot different- her hair was half-shaved, dyed purple, and styled to the side instead of in two braids. She was much taller, with black clothes instead of the casual white dress she'd always had. But Eleven recognized her face. And a quick glance to her wrist showed the *008* tattoo.

"Come on, we've got to move fast." Eight said.

"Eight?" Eleven asked quietly, eyes wide.

"Yes, it's me." she had a sad smile, and she glanced down at Eleven's own tattoo. "I'm sorry I couldn't get you out sooner. But we have to go, before they realize your door is open."

"Where?" El asked.

"We're going outside. I'm getting you out of this Lab, I'm getting you home."

Eleven felt a quick, panicked pang in her chest. "Outside?"

"I've got friends. They can get us out. And it's not bad outside, Eleven. They lied. They lied to you. I can get you out, and we can be safe together. But we have to go fast."

Eleven hesitated. She had a feeling that Papa wouldn't want her to leave, and the Doctors would be mad at her, and she would be punished... but that was *if* she was caught.

If she could get out, and if Eight could protect her from the dangers of the world outside, then she wouldn't have to deal with the punishments anymore. She would be safe.

She jumped off her bed, grabbed Eight's hand, and ran with her.

Eleven realized, once they were running down the halls, that an alarm was going off.

"Don't worry about that, it's not for us. Not yet." Eight said, as they rushed down a hall; she kept glancing down corners, watching for

people who might be coming. “Everyone’s rushing down to the Third Floor, if we can down to the Second or First, I can help you climb out the window, you can jump us over the fence, and we can be in and out before they even realize we’re gone.”

Eight was using a lot of big words and a lot of long sentences, and Eleven still wasn’t entirely sure what was happening. “Third?”

“Yes, the Third Floor, we’re on the Sixth right now. The Doctors are all going down there to stabilize...”

Eleven noticed her trail off as she opened a door, leading them to a stairwell. She walked in, turning around and waiting for her sister to shut the door, and then she asked, “Stabilize?”

Eight took a quick breath. “There’s... they brought a new boy in. Grabbed him off the street. He just woke up and he’s *not* happy. That’s how I got in, I snuck in with the truck and made them think I was invisible. They didn’t see me, and now all their eyes are on him.”

Eight made a move to go down the stairs, but noticed that Eleven wasn’t moving. “Eleven? Let’s go.”

Eleven shook her head. “Brother.”

She wanted to get out, sure. But not if it meant forcing another to take her place. And if maybe she could help him, she could help the boy get out with them, too. Three siblings, all together, all protecting each other.

Eight sighed, then moved forwards and kneeled in front of her, meeting her eye-level. “Eleven, listen to me. I’m getting you out, and then I’m coming back for him. I’m going to get us all out of here. But if we’re all together, we have a better chance of getting spotted, and I’m not getting him out without a fight, either. So I’m getting you out first, and then I’m going back for him.”

“I can help-”

“You can help by getting out.” Eight said. “I’m getting you out of the building, getting you to a safe place, and then I’m coming back for the boy.”

Eleven took a shaky breath, and then nodded. She trusted Eight. Eight would protect her.

“Now, we have to go before-”

They both jumped upon a hearing a door slam; the floor above them. Eight swore under her breath, then grabbed Eleven’s hand and started to run. Eleven heard a man shout behind them, and she started to push herself to go faster. They’d been spotted. They were going to be caught and punished and *she should have just stayed in bed.*

Eight grabbed Eleven, pushing her into the corner of a stairwell and standing in front of her. She started breathing slower, concentrating hard.

A group of Doctors ran right past them, not seeing them at all.

Eight sighed and stood up after a second, turning back to Eleven. “More will be coming. We have to move *fast.*”

Eleven nodded, but Eight didn’t see, because she simply grabbed Eleven’s hand and started to run again. They had to skid to a stop after an instant, hearing more people running up the stairs; Eight turned around, finding the door next to the Landing, and pushed it open, dragging Eleven out with her.

“Shit.” Eight muttered, once she realized what floor they were on. “We’re on the Third. Shit.”

She turned around, realized that the men running up the stairs were probably only seconds away from opening the door, and then grabbed Eleven’s hand again, rushing her down the hall. “This will have to do.”

She saw the boy for only a few seconds.

They rushed past a door, and Eleven could hear shouts and gunfire and screaming. She peered through the window, and saw the boy in the center of the room. She only watched him for a few seconds

before Eight made her move faster, but she tried as hard as she could to memorize every detail of him.

He had brown hair, which was whipping around in the wind. His skin was a pale purple, and hands were outstretched, preventing darts and bullets from hitting him. He jumped around to throw out his hands, wind rushing around him and hitting the people who were trying to attack him. Suddenly, the purple in his skin turned tan, and he looked much more normal; however, he simply reached down and touched the white floor, and as the floor started to slowly turn gray, his skin turned a porcelain color, and in an instant, the room was filling with ice.

“What’s he doing?” El asked as they ran, and she felt shivers from the new weather start to reach her.

“He summons powers from colors, I believe.” Eight simply said.
“Drains their energy.”

“Energy?”

Eight shushed her. “I can explain once we get out. We have to move before-”

They turned a bend, and then froze. Because right ahead of them, several soldiers were standing there, guns drawn and pointed at them.

“Shit.” was the first thing that Eight said.

The girls turned, to see more soldiers running from the other side.

“Security Cameras, of course.” Eight muttered. “They must have seen... shit. Shit. Okay, I need you to listen to me.”

Eleven turned to her, and Eight shut her eyes again. She spoke, barely moving. “The soldiers think we’re standing there and staring. I only have a few moments before they try to move us. I’m going to throw you out the window, and I need you to stay calm. Can you still move things with your mind? Levitate yourself down and get into the woods. Run into town and hide somewhere, then look for Axel, Funshine, Mick or Dottie. They’ll get you out.”

“And you?” Eleven asked, worried.

“I’ll get out.”

Eight dropped the illusion, grabbing Eleven’s arm. “You’re not taking us!” she said angrily, staring the men down.

“Stand down, Eight.”

Both girls froze at his voice. Eight started shaking, too, and they turned to see Papa walking down the hall.

“Get the *fuck* away from her.” Eight said, her voice a venomous hiss.

“Stand down, Eight.” Papa said again, and El started to shake more. He sounded angry. “I don’t know what you’ve told Eleven, but we’re taking care of her.”

“The same way you took care of me?” Eight narrowed her eyes, pushing herself in front of her sister, glancing towards the window on the wall. None of the soldiers gave those windows a second look; either the glass had faded into the background, or they didn’t think either girl would be stupid enough to jump.

“Eleven,” Papa said, now directing his attention to the younger girl, his cold eyes piercing into her. Eleven looked up at him, terrified. “Eleven, she’s lying to you. She’s trying to hurt you. We’re trying to save you.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Eight said. “He’s trying to keep you trapped.”

Eleven looked between them, still terrified. She could just go back. She could just go with Papa, maybe he wouldn’t punish her if she listened to him; maybe this was all a test, anyway, and then she wouldn’t have to go outside, she wouldn’t have to face the world she never knew. The Lab was scary, but it was a familiar fear. She had no idea what to expect outside of these walls.

But if she went back, she’d be in the Lab forever. Right now, Eleven might have a chance to escape. She might have a chance to be free.

So she turned and stared at the window, and saw it shatter before

her, saw the glass fly away into the night.

She heard the men scream, she heard Papa's scolding voice, but Eight was silent. Eight knew what she had to do.

Eleven felt herself lifted off of her feet, and her sister gave her one last, hopeful look, before throwing her out the window.

As Eleven levitated herself to the ground, she looked up at the sky.

The stars shone above her.

She was out.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, so a couple things to note here:

- This fic is the first in a three-part series. However, it was originally half of a fic in a two-part series; there was going to be a separate storyline taking place in the future, and these chapters were flashbacks (think something like the average "Once Upon a Time" episode). However, that fic got... really long? So I ended up splitting them, and the future storyline will be Part II.

- Due to this, there are a couple things that you might notice are told and not shown- IE certain backstories, character moments and reveals. That would be because the original plan was for some of the reveals to be in the future-section. So if something seems like it should've been shown instead of told, or if a storyline seems rushed, that's because of the split, or maybe just because I'm bad at this, whichever explanation makes you feel better. There will also be several things that seem plot-hole-ish that will be revealed in Parts II or III.

- I had to do a bit of research for this, including looking up other Superhero AUs to make sure mine isn't too similar to someone else's, and also googling

the physics behind some stuff (to which I ended up saying "screw it, it's superpowers, I can do what I want, electrocution can't hurt that much, can it?"). Another thing I had to research included how to write things like PTSD, including flashbacks and panic attacks as a symptom. That will be featured later in fic, and I am trying to write it with as much respect and accuracy as I can. If I write something wrong or accidentally offensive, please let me know, and I will edit the fic to fix it. I don't want to misrepresent something like this.

- While Parts I and II will be exclusively "Stranger Things", the plan is for Part III to be a crossover with the 2017 film version of Stephen King's "It".
- Due to the Split, the last couple chapters of this might have some major time jumps. I hope that doesn't cause any problems.

Anyway, thank you so much for reading my fic and for reading that entire list of stuff, lol. Love you all!
:D

2. Earlier that Morning, before Eleven's defenestration

CHAPTER TWO

Earlier that Morning, before Eleven's defenestration

“I swear, it’s a conspiracy.”

The five kids were sitting at a picnic table on the field, watching people pass by. Dustin was throwing a paper ball into the air and catching it repeatedly, which was starting to really annoy everybody.

“It’s not a conspiracy, Dustin, it’s just bullshit.” Mike sighed.

“No, seriously, they say it’s budget cuts that made them cut down on the days we can have AV Club.” Dustin said, catching the ball again, “But the football field is gonna be redone *again*? They’re just trying to force us all into sports.”

“What would they *gain* by forcing us all into sports?” Lucas asked, glaring at him. “They can only have, like, a certain amount of kids per team, right?”

“They just want us to compete for spots.” Dustin said. “So that we don’t make friends, and we’re alone, and then the government can pick us off one by one.”

“This isn’t *The Hunger Games*, Dustin.” Mike huffed. “The government’s not trying to kill us.”

“But they *are*!”

“Do you think they’ll cancel AV altogether?” Will asked worriedly. He liked the club, and he liked being able to stay somewhere after school, to avoid Troy and James on the way out of the building.

“That would be pretty bad PR, especially since Hawkins High really likes priding itself on how smart everyone is.” Mike assured him.

“What do you think?” Lucas turned to the girl on his right, trying to involve her in the conversation.

Max simply glanced at them, and then pulled an earbud out from her ear, which had previously been hidden under her bright red hair. “What’d you say?”

“Damnit, Max, I thought you wanted to hang out with us.” Mike rolled his eyes. “And when you do, you just listen to music?”

“Well, none of you talked to me for eight full minutes, so I figured I was out of the conversation.” Max shrugged. “What was the question, again?”

The boys all glanced at each other awkwardly, as Lucas said, “Uh, nevermind. What’re you listening to?”

“Heavy Metal and curse words.”

“Of course.” Dustin nodded. “That makes sense.”

Max smiled. “I mean, if you *actually* wanna hear it, we can blast it super loud, have a random dance party, and scare everyone else. Sound like fun?”

“That actually does.” Will surprised everybody by saying.

“We’ll get in trouble.” Lucas said.

Max gave him a smirk. “What? You scared of a couple of angry looks from people we don’t know?”

“Of course I’m not-”

“Then what song do you think is the worst?”

The others hadn’t noticed Mike pull out his phone while they were talking, but then he interrupted them with, “Shit. I gotta get home.”

“What? Why?” Will asked.

“Apparently Mom saw something on the news about a robbery going

on? She wants me to get home, you know how she is.” Mike rolled his eyes.

The boys stiffened. “Where?” Will asked.

“I dunno, probably somewhere in town.” he shrugged, getting to his feet.

“Hey, Wheeler, if you’re going, mind walking me home?” Max said, also standing up and pulling a skateboard out of her bag. “My Mom’ll be the same, give it a couple of minutes and I’ll get the same text, as if I can’t deal with a little bullshit on my own.”

Mike bit back a groan, but nodded. “Yeah, sure. Whatever. You guys gonna be okay?”

The boys nodded, and Mike said, “Let’s hurry up, before some more shit goes down.”

Mike had expected- well, he’d *hoped*- that Max would just listen to her music on the way back. She did not.

About halfway down a street, she slowed her skateboard to get next to him, and said, “Hey. I’ve got a question.”

“Shoot.”

“What’s the best way to hit on a guy?”

Mike stopped in place, causing Max to slide a bit in front of him. She turned to glare at him, and he said, “Wh-what?”

“You heard me, Wheeler. How do I hit on a guy?”

Mike stared at her for a good, solid minute, before he asked, “You mean like *me*? ”

“What? No! No, not *you*.” Max said, and Mike sighed with relief. “No, I mean Lucas.”

Mike immediately stiffened again. “What?”

“I wanna ask out Lucas, but he’s a dumbass who can’t take a hint. How do I do that?”

“Why the *fu-*” Mike shook his head. “Why the *hell* do you think I would know?”

“Well, you’re a boy, and Lucas’s friend, so I figured...?” Max shrugged.

“Look, just... just take him out for ice cream, I don’t know! I don’t know how dates work!”

“Oh, yeah, right, you don’t.” Max rolled her eyes. “I forgot how useless you were.”

“Excuse me?” Max started to skate away, and Mike had to run after her as she turned a bend. “Excuse me, you just got here two months ago! If anyone’s the useless one-”

“Sorry, can’t hear you.” Max said, as she picked up her phone and started playing an *Icon for Hire* song, her earbuds already in.

Mike groaned. As they moved farther down the street, he felt a buzz in his pocket, and pulled out his phone, glancing down. He tapped Max on the shoulder, waving the screen at her.

An alert had popped up on his phone, probably from that security app his Mom had made him install: *Powered Individuals have been spotted in the area. Seek another route.*

Max pulled out an earbud- though Mike could still hear the song blaring at top volume- and said, “In our area? Do you think they’ll come our way?”

She sounded a lot more excited than Mike felt. “Hopefully not.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Max narrowed her eyes towards him, kicking her skateboard a little bit slower so that they could talk.

Mike glanced away, saying quickly, “Well, my Mom would flip. She’s

heard everything they say on the news; the whole ‘dangerous’ thing, and how their powers are a genetic mutation that’ll eventually kill them, that sorta shit.”

“Honestly, do you actually believe that?” Max huffed. “We just got told that on TV by a bunch of old guys paid off by the government. You know, a hundred years ago, a bunch of old guys paid off by the government said that girls should be hospitalized for trying to vote and that lobotomies with ice picks could cure mental illness.”

“It doesn’t matter if *I* believe this crap.” Mike sighed, as they approached the corner of the sidewalk. “My parents do, and they’ll flip if we run into—”

They turned the bend in the road, and saw, right ahead, three men running towards them, dressed in black and carrying suspicious-looking cases. It didn’t take a huge leap of logic to figure out who these guys were and what they’d just did.

Shit, they probably should’ve taken the longer way home.

Mike and Max froze, staring at the men, who had stopped running and were giving the kids dark looks. Max slowly reached down to her phone, pausing the music.

They stared for another few seconds, and then Mike said, “Fuck.”

The kids turned to go, but before they could, they heard one of the men let out a yell.

Mike whipped around, to see that one of the men had been hit with some shiny red material, which evaporated into the air. In an instant, a boy about their size had rushed in from the right, jumping in front of them, his arms held out in front; he was dressed in a dark red-and-off-white fabric, with a masquerade-style mask thrown over his face. He turned to look at them, and Mike noticed that it was hard for him to focus on the boy’s face, for some reason; it was like trying to memorize the way the sun looked.

“Go! Go!” the boy said.

“What the hell did you just do?” Max asked, eyes wide.

Mike knew, though. This kid had summoned some kind of energy blast.

"Max," he whispered, "I think the powered kids came our way."

Another two boys had entered, dropping from the roof above them. One held out blue-gloved hands that were sparking with some kind of electricity, and the other touched a pink flowerpot beside them, causing his skin to turn the same shade; he seemed to be the only one not wearing gloves, with his sleeves tapering off at his wrist.

"Max, we gotta go!" Mike said, panic rising in his voice.

"I wanna see!" Max protested.

"Go!" the red-clothed kid said, pushing them down the street.

Finally, Max sighed and started to skate away as fast as she could. Mike gave the powered boys and angry thieves one last, frightened look, before he followed.

However, Max stopped just behind a building corner. "Let's watch!" she said, excitement in her voice.

"What? Why? No!" Mike said, but Max wouldn't listen, enraptured by the scene in front of her. As she watched, Mike slowly turned and faced away, grabbing onto the brick wall besides them, trying not to focus on the fight only a few feet away.

Great. Mike thought, as the powered boys started charging at the thieves. Just what I needed today. To be caught in the middle of a vigilante fight.

Mom's gonna kill me if she finds out.

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow, it's time I finally finalize 3/6 of their superhero names (I've been using placeholders this whole time lol). The names are hard cause they've gotta be a good mix of "relevant", "cool sounding" and "a twelve-year-old named their self-insert so it

can't sound THAT good" Hope it ended up decent :D

3. That's Not How Things Work in Hawkins

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again, superhero names were kindof hard. They were basically decided on relevance, how cool they sounded, if they sounded like something a pre-teen would name their OP self-insert, and bonus points if it was a reference to something in-canon.

After Mike eventually runs into the Team again, I'll explain specifically why I chose what I did.

Thanks for the comments! :D

CHAPTER THREE

That's Not How Things Work in Hawkins

“Heads up, Wisdom!”

Wisdom ducked as a lightning bolt shot over his head, hitting one of the thieves square in the chest. The man hit the wall, and stayed on the ground, stirring feebly. *One down, two to go.*

He slowly reached onto the street, touching the asphalt and feeling a warmth spread through his body as his skin turned the same shade of gray. He threw out his hands, and a metal trash can catapulted towards the robbers. “Nice one, Wise Guy!” said Dragonfire, who jumped over him on his way towards the thieves.

Wisdom nodded, hoping that he didn’t know that he had intended to shoot rocks at them instead.

Gray is Metal. He reminded himself. Brown is Rocks and Dirt. I need something brown next.

But he couldn’t change his power until the gray faded away, and he

had about a minute left. Last time they tried to combine colors, he'd ended up almost blowing up the Castle.

He ducked to the ground as another lightning bolt soared above him, coming from Cyclone's hands. The bolts were just a sharp jab- definitely not as dangerous as normal electricity- but Wisdom wasn't in the mood for distractions at the moment.

Dragonfire yelled something, and red energy poured from his hands, encircling one of the thieves and throwing him against the wall, wrapping him up and then dumping him into the trash can. He seemed stuck there, for now. *One left.*

Wisdom thought for a second, and then ran to a windowsill, grabbing onto a white flower petal and watching it fade to gray. The small amount of color wouldn't give him power for very long, but he only needed a few seconds. And the flower's original color would return to it in a few minutes.

He saw the final robber staring down the other two boys, who were approaching warily, wondering which one was going to move first. Wisdom took a deep breath, and then ran forwards, sliding past Cyclone and landing in front of the thief, holding out his hands and feeling a blast of cold air against his back. The thief let out a string of curse words as the wind pushed him, too, against the wall of the building. Wisdom focused some more, and a block of ice stuck the man to the wall, trapping him in place.

We got them.

"Hell yes!"

Oh, shit.

Wisdom whipped around, to see Max run up towards them, with Mike hesitantly following. Cyclone and Dragonfire immediately backed up, staring in panic.

"That was so cool!" Max cheered. "How did you do all that shit? Are you guys a team? Do you have *names*?"

None of the boys answered. Mike finally said, "Uh... yeah. Cool, Max,

we should go-”

He looked about as uncomfortable as the rest of the boys. However, before any of them could say anything, they heard the sirens.

“Police!” Dragonfire yelled.

“We gotta go!” Cyclone added.

“Why?” Max asked, and the boys all stared at her. “You guys just stopped the bad guys, they’ll like that.”

Wisdom finally said something to her; he turned to her and simply stated, “That’s not how things work in Hawkins.”

And then he ran.

Wisdom rushed down several streets, sprinting until he couldn’t hear the sirens anymore. He ducked into an empty alley, looking around to see if he’d been followed. He hadn’t, not by friend or enemy.

He sighed and curled up against the wall, staring at his reflection in a puddle. His one-piece outfit- made of some kind of fabric that Cyclone said he couldn’t identify- could only be described as the color of a metal that hit the light at just the right time to create a small, blurry rainbow, which was one of the few perks of having his powers. His mask covered only a little bit of his face, but it would protect him from recognition so long as it remained on. That’s how it worked, whether he liked it or not.

That’s not how things work in Hawkins.

Max had come from California, a place where no powered kids had shown up, at least to his knowledge. They probably didn’t know about powers at all over there, so of course she’d be excited to meet the team. He wondered if she knew how everyone treated the superhumans. He’d seen kids show up on posters next to wanted criminals for simply making the mistake of exposing their powers, how, when he discovered his powers, he’d cried for almost two days straight, terrified that he’d be found out and arrested and sent to

God-knows-where.

He sighed. He should probably take the costume off. He was almost home, anyway, and he didn't want to scare his Mom with his vigilante getup.

Folding his hands together, he focused on channeling his energy to his fingertips. It was a trick that Cyclone had taught him, that he'd figured out seemingly on his own. He needed to focus his magic- his power- into one place, and channel enough of it in order to transform or detransform.

And as he focused, he felt his outfit melt away. When he opened his eyes, and looked into his reflection, Wisdom was gone, and Will Byers looked up at him.

Will stood up, walking out of the alley and turning the corner. He could see the back of his house up ahead, at the end of the road. He could go in the back door, pretend that AV Club ran late, and then his Mom wouldn't ask him where he was when the Powered Kids showed up to stop a robbery.

However, about four houses away from his own, he paused. A white van was parked across the street, labelled *Hawkins Power & Light*, and men were standing next to it, talking to each other in hushed whispers, both dressed in identical dark suits.

That was a bit odd. He didn't think electrical people wore suits like that.

Will began to walk some more, but he couldn't shake the feeling that something was wrong. Something felt *wrong*.

He took another two steps before he realized that the men by the van were watching him. He turned, staring at them and trying to figure out what they wanted. It wasn't unusual for a kid to walk home alone, so why did they-

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain in his back. He let out a shocked gasp, losing his balance briefly and staggering forwards on the sidewalk. He reached back to grab whatever had hit him, grappling with the

edge of something that felt like glass. He was starting to feel numb, a slow panic settling in. He finally reached whatever was in his back, ripping it out and bringing it towards his face.

It was a clear dart, shaped similar to a syringe. There were a few drops of transparent liquid on the inside, and Will realized with a start that the rest of the liquid had been injected into him.

He turned around again, to see a blonde woman in a suit walking calmly towards him. She gave off an air that terrified him. He knew instantly that he had to get away from her, that he was in a trouble that he had to run away *now*.

Will started to run, trying to get closer to his house. He was now three houses away, and his legs were starting to feel heavier, as if someone had replaced all of his blood with lead. When he passed one house, though, he saw another suited person step out in front of him. He slid to a stop, shocked, and that gave the woman enough time to grab him from behind.

He was starting to get dizzy, and he felt like he couldn't breathe. His eyes were getting heavy, and he was starting to lose feeling in his legs completely. None of that was helping his terror. He heard the van start across the street, and saw it start to move out of the corner of his eye. The woman had grabbed his arms and pinned them back, and was starting to drag him away. He opened his mouth, trying to let out a scream, trying to relay to his neighbors, to his *Mother*, that he was just outside, that he was in danger.

But no sound came out of his mouth.

Will kept trying to scream, even as the van pulled up. But he could make no noise, and he couldn't move his legs, and he was starting to drift into unconsciousness. The only senses that hadn't diminished were the feeling of the woman's rough hands around his arms, her cold fingernails digging to his skin as she dragged him towards the open door of the van, and the pure terror rising in his chest.

He was roughly thrown into the back of the van, but he barely felt the pain of the landing. He struggled to keep his eyes open, to keep himself awake, to fight whatever they had done to him, but he passed

out before the van even drove the way.

Just two houses away, and he couldn't even make it home.

Mike was biking through the woods. He knew the trail, now. He'd followed this path for several weeks, and even if he hadn't, he knew these woods like the back of his hand. Even though he'd only left nearby recently, him and the other boys used to hike through the paths to try and make their own map.

Within a few minutes, he'd reached the edge of the woods, and parked his bike against a tree, before ducking behind a bush and staring up at Hawkins Lab.

He'd been stalking the Lab for almost a month; every night at 11:30, when his parents went to bed, he'd climb out the apartment window, grab his bike from the rack, and make his way over to the edge of the forest, where he'd take a notebook and pencil out of his bag and observe until around 2:00 in the morning.

About a month ago, Nancy had been talking on the phone while he did homework in the next room, and he'd told her to quiet down twice, but she kept talking to Barb as loud as she could. Eventually, though, she'd said something that caught his interest: "Did you hear about the Lab outside of town? Steve says that they're studying powers... yeah, I know... that's why I- no, no, he's a credible source! Shut *up*! We'll talk about that *later*! I'm just *saying*, it's pretty interesting, you think they'll release their findings? ... Yeah, yeah... no, I didn't do the Chemistry homework yet..."

Mike had been interested immediately. What exactly were they studying with superpowers? How they worked? Where they came from? Or even how to get rid of them? He didn't dare ask Nancy and reveal he'd been eavesdropping- even though, once again, he'd asked her to quiet down multiple times. So he decided to find out himself.

He'd been watching for a month now, trying to figure out the Guards' shifts. He assumed after another month, he'd be able to find out if there was a pattern. And he'd looked up their cameras- and exactly

what their weaknesses were, and when they would glitch. He wanted to be able to sneak in, to find out what was going on, maybe look through some of their files.

He expected that eventually, he'd see something interesting. He did not expect, out of all the things that could have happened, to see a girl crash through the window. He'd just been watching, wishing he'd brought more than one coat or maybe worn a sweater, and he noticed the lights on the third floor light up. Sometimes they turned different colors, but only faintly. He watched closely, trying to figure out what was going on.

And then a window shattered.

He heard it first- it was far enough away that it was a quiet noise, not as sudden as would send him into a panic, but he still stiffened immediately. The noise wasn't a pleasant one- especially for him- and it took quite a few seconds of panicked breathing and grabbing at his jacket for him to calm down enough to look towards the source of the noise. One of the windows had broken, and as he watched, he saw someone fall out. He jumped to his feet in shock, still shaking a little, only to freeze in place when the body stopped mid-air.

He saw the girl float to the ground, and then looked up to see men in the window, pointing down at her. At first, he wondered if maybe she was sick. She had a Hospital Gown, after all- at least he thought she did, it was hard to tell from the distance. But then he saw the men draw guns, pointing them down at the girl, who was running at the large, barbed-wire fence surrounding the building. There were shooting, and the child turned around, holding out her hands. The guns dropped from the window, and the men started shouting. As the girl reached the fence, more windows opened, and more guards arrived.

Oh, shit. Mike thought.

The girl held her hands towards the ground. She rose again, flying over the fence, and managed to hit the ground before the guns started going off. She ducked, gasping and covering her neck, and then ran for the forest.

Mike didn't hesitate. He supposed she could be dangerous- most people with powers were- but she was a kid. Now that she was getting closer, he could see that she was no older than him. And these men were trying to kill her.

The girl burst into the trees, and Mike reached out to grab her arm. She whipped around, hand extended in preparation to fight, and then the two of them met eyes. Hers were tear-filled and terrified, but they calmed slightly once she saw him. She glanced away for just a bit, looking back at Hawkins Lab for a confused instant.

Mike stared in that direction, too, to see that soldiers were now streaming out the door, heading right for the fence. He sighed, shouldered his bag, and gestured to his bike. "Get on."

The girl hesitated, looking between him and the Lab, and then ran towards him. He helped her onto the bike, and then sat in front of her, grabbing the handlebars. He took another deep breath, and then pedaled as fast as he could.

4. Mike hides a Fugitive in his Apartment

CHAPTER FOUR

Mike hides a Fugitive in his Apartment

Mike rushed through the forest, the bike tires screeching as they ran over leaves and twigs and roots whenever they strayed from the path. The girl on the back of the bike was clutching onto him, shaking and burying her head in his jacket.

He thought people might be following them, but he wasn't sure. He'd turned away from home three times, going deeper into the woods before turning back. He figured that if someone was following them, he wanted them to not be able to predict where he was going.

After what felt like an hour, he stopped at an area he knew was right outside of town. He waited until everything was silent, and then listened. The only sounds he heard were the ones of the forest- the leaves rustling, the crickets chirping, the wind blowing through the branches, all that stuff. He couldn't hear any footsteps.

He turned around a little, staring at the girl behind him, who was still grabbing onto him. "Are you okay?"

She didn't respond, but she did look up. Her eyes were much calmer now, and he noticed that they were a very pretty shade of brown. He froze up for a second, and then repeated himself. "Are you okay?"

Once again, she stayed silent. He sighed. "I'm, uh, I'm gonna take you to my apartment. You can hide there until we figure out... what's going on."

He expected her to just keep staring, but then she nodded at him, wrapping her arms around him tighter and glancing down at the ground.

Mike paused, and then started pedaling again.

"Be quiet!" Mike said, as they reached the front door. "The night manager is probably too tired to care about us, but if my family wakes up, we'll get caught."

The girl nodded silently. She hadn't said a word since he'd found her, and Mike was starting to wonder if she *could* talk.

The two of them went into the building, with Mike hoping that nobody noticed that the girl he was guiding was wearing his jacket, the hood over her head to cover her shaved hair. He didn't want them to be able to report her if she was announced missing, and he also didn't want questions about the girl he was bringing to his apartment.

They went into the elevator, which seemed to scare her a bit. When it started moving, she gasped and backed up a little, staring at the ceiling. He reached over to grab her arm, saying, "Hey, it's alright." She seemed a little surprised at the physical contact, and slowly pulled away; Mike glanced away awkwardly, and the two of them stood in silence until the door opened. Mike ran down the hall to his door after he made sure that the girl would follow, slowly turning the spare key in the lock and hoping it was quiet enough that nobody would notice.

Thankfully, the rest of his family stayed asleep as he crept in, closing and locking the door behind them as the girl surveyed the room. He grabbed her hand once he was done, dragging her as fast as he could to his own room.

Once they were there, he shut the door and moved to the windows, closing the blinds. He honestly couldn't believe he was doing this, but what choice did he have? He wasn't letting her go back there, not until he knew what was going on.

As soon as he was sure that nobody could see them from outside, he turned to the girl. "Uh... do you need food?"

She had been staring at some items on his desk, but once he talked, she looked at him, a little blankly.

“Food? You know... I think we have Eggos in the kitchen. Maybe you already ate today? Would you like a blanket? I-I can get you...”

The girl simply walked over to his bed, sitting on it. Her eyes widened in surprise as the mattress bounced under her.

“How about new clothes? That dress got kinda dirty, didn’t it? You can borrow some of mine for now, and when Mom’s not looking tomorrow, I can get you Nancy’s old ones.”

He rushed over to his dresser, pulling out a sweater and jeans. He turned to hand those to her, and she blinked at him, before putting the clothes next to her and reaching to pull her hospital gown up.

“Ah!” Mike yelled, turning around and shutting his eyes. He could hear her pause behind him, before continuing to change. He kept his eyes shut until he felt her tap his shoulder, and when he turned around, she had the outfit on, though he was pretty sure the sweater was backwards.

“Okay, okay...” Mike said carefully, and then he ran to the closet, throwing it open and emptying out the items on the floor. “You can hide in here, I’ll leave the door a little open in case it gets too stuffy, and then you just have to hide until my parents leave for the day. Is that okay?”

The girl hesitated, and then crawled into the closet. Mike kneeled down, so he could get face-to-face with her. “Can, uh... can you talk? I... I hope you’ll tell me what happened there, when you’re ready. I want to help.”

She didn’t say anything, so he tried a safer topic. “Do you have a name? You know, so I can call you something?”

She paused, and then slowly reached out her arm towards him. He flinched, staring down at it, and then she pulled the sweater sleeve away, showing him a tattoo.

011.

“Eleven?” he said, and then looked up at her. *Oh, oh God.* “Is that your name?”

She nodded, and he felt his heart break. Who would call a child by a number? As if they weren't a person? Did she have any other names? Yikes, he didn't want to call her by a number while she was with him.

"Well... my name's Mike, short for Michael. Maybe... maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven."

The girl paused, and then nodded, a small smile flickering across her face. She had kind of a pretty smile.

Mike moved the closet door a little, but stopped when he saw her flinch. Well... the door was closed enough. "Uh, goodnight, El."

As he turned to go, he thought heard a faint, "Goodnight, Mike."

Mike made sure his alarm was set early, so that he could wake up before everybody else. However, once he awoke to the steady beeps, he heard a *thud*, and turned to see that a girl had fallen out of the closet. Mike jumped up, the night before flooding back into his memories, and he slammed his hand onto the *Snooze* button.

El sat up, panic in her eyes, and she pointed to the clock.

"It's okay! It's okay!" Mike said quickly, his voice as quiet as he could make it so that he didn't alert anybody else in the house to the fact that he was awake. El looked up at him, and he said, "It's just an alarm to wake me up. Nothing's wrong."

He slowly got out of bed, sitting down in front of her. She sat up, too, and they stared at each other for a bit.

"Uh, Good Morning, El." Mike said. She didn't respond, so he said, "Okay, so, Mom goes in my room sometimes, but she hasn't re-organized my closet in a while, so if you stay in there, you won't be seen. I'm gonna find out who's going where today, so I can find out when I can let you out. And then we'll figure out what we're going to do, okay?"

She nodded a little, and he said, "I'll leave the closet door open, but

you gotta curl into the corner. So that nobody can see you. I'll be right back, okay?"

Slowly, El moved back into the closet, flinching as her face brushed against a hanging outfit.

Mike took a deep breath and stood up, grabbing some clean clothes from his drawers. He could probably take a quick shower before breakfast, if he hurried, and then he could figure out what he was going to do.

It hit him, on the way out of his room, that he was hiding a fugitive, super-powered girl in his closet.

Well... shit.

"Morning, asshole." Nancy said from the table, flipping through her book and completely ignoring her cereal.

"Language, Nancy." Karen said, glaring at her daughter as Mike sat down, pouring himself a bowl of whatever cereal his Mom had placed on the table.

"Hey, Holly." Mike greeted his younger sister first; she giggled at him from her high-chair. "How'd you sleep? Ready for School?"

"It's Saturday, dipshit." Nancy sighed.

"*Nancy.* Not in front of Holly!"

Mike glanced up at his Mom. "Hey, are we doing anything today? I was thinking of visiting Will."

"Since when do you *not* visit Will?" Nancy asked.

"What is up with *you* today?" Mike asked, glaring at her.

Nancy sighed, rubbing her eyes. "Stayed up late talking to Barb."

Mike had a feeling that she had been talking to Steve instead, but he

didn't really want to talk about *that* at the moment. Before he could ask his question again, he noticed his Mom's attention focusing on the TV in the corner of the room, which had been left on the News Channel.

"Three unnamed 'powered' individuals were recorded yesterday attempting to stop a robbery." Came the reporter's voice, over a grainy security-camera recording, and Mike jumped when he realized it was a clip of the day before. He only had a moment to panic that he might show up, however, when the footage flipped back to the Reporter at a desk, without showing what powers the people had. *"Authorities urge the public to report any known powered humans to your local police department before their powers can get out of control. Our-*

"Can we shut that off?" Nancy asked sharply, which Mike was thankful for. He was starting to feel a cold shiver as he watched the channel. "It's stupid."

As Karen reached for the remote to lower the volume, Mike stared down at his cereal, which he really didn't feel like eating anymore. He was sure that his Mom would probably go into a rant about how those kids' powers were slowly killing them, and he didn't want to have to sit through that, for several reasons.

"So," he said, deciding to shift the conversation as fast as he could, "What're we doing?"

"Well, your Father's at work all day, again." Karen sighed, looking at Holly instead of him, as the younger girl was starting to spill her food onto the table. "And I'm taking Holly to her friend's house, might stay over there. So it'll be you and Nancy today."

That was great news. Mike tried not to smile, and simply shrugged. "Cool. I'll just... go talk to Will, then."

"Whatever you want, honey." Karen said. "Just remember to call me if anything happens."

"Nothing will." Nancy sighed, flipping another page of her book. "The Byers House is the most boring place on Earth."

“Says you.” Mike rolled his eyes.

The Byers really were fantastic, but he wasn’t going to their house today. He had more important things to do.

So, of course, he wasn’t aware that Will Byers had gone missing until that afternoon.

5. Mike feeds his fugitive Eggos

CHAPTER FIVE

Mike feeds his fugitive Eggos

“Alright, dipshit,” Nancy said the second that their Mom left the apartment, “I’m going out on a date with Steve. You promise not to die while I’m gone?”

Now, *this* was even better. “So long as you promise not to get pregnant.” Mike shrugged, trying not to look too happy at the prospect of being alone all day.

Nancy punched his arm- hard- and then grabbed her bag off the floor. “I’ll be back before Mom. Have fun with your nerd friend.”

“I will!”

Mike waited until he heard her footsteps disappear down the hall, and then he ran into his room, throwing open his closet door. “Alright, we got the apartment to ourselves all day, what-”

He stopped talking upon seeing her.

She was curled in the corner of the closet, hugging her knees and crying.

Mike opened the door farther, letting the light shine in, and then he crawled into the closet, too, sitting in front of her. “Hey. Are you okay?”

She nodded.

“Are you sure?”

She paused, not entirely sure how to answer. Eventually, Mike leaned over and grabbed her hand. “Hey, why don’t we go to the kitchen? It’s brighter there, you can see out the windows, and I can get you

some waffles. Would you like that?”

El nodded, and Mike smiled, grabbing her hand and helping her stand up, leading her out of the closet. “There we go.” he said. “Let’s go get-”

“Are you safe?”

Mike jumped at the sound of her voice, and turned around. “Sorry, what?”

“Are you safe?” El asked, glancing worriedly towards the window.
“Are you... going to hurt me?”

“What? No, no!” Mike wildly shook his head. He couldn’t imagine ever hurting her on *purpose*. “No, I won’t hurt you, not if I can help it. Not like those men with guns.”

“The Soldiers.” El clarified.

“Yeah. I’m gonna keep you safe, promise.”

“Promise?”

Shit. Shit, she didn’t know what that word meant. Mike wondered how many words she actually knew. How long had she been in the Lab? “It’s, uh, it’s something you can’t break. Ever. And I promise that I won’t let you get hurt.”

El let herself smile a little, and she nodded at him.

Mike grinned and started walking again. “Come on. We’ve got tons of food and stuff. You like Eggos?”

It turned out that El *did* like Eggos.

“Wow, you’re really hungry.” Mike said, after making the third batch and seeing her eyes light up. “Did they not feed you decent food in... that place?”

El flinched, but then shook her head.

Well, she was talking to him, which was something. But everything she said just made him feel even worse for her. “Do... do you have any parents?” Mike asked, sitting on the chair across from her as she bit into a waffle.

She froze a little at the question, before nodding slightly.

“Oh, I can try and talk to them-”

“No.”

Mike jumped at the severity of her tone, and then asked, “Wh-why not?”

“Papa’s in the Lab.”

Oh. “Is there anybody else I can call? Is there a place you can go?”

El considered, then asked. “Axel, Funshine, Mick, Dottie?” After a confused second, she asked, “You... know them?”

Those were a lot of names, and Mike didn’t recognize any of them, although he was pretty sure that *Funshine* was a Care Bear. “Uh, no. No, why, are they your siblings?”

El shook her head.

“Then, why-”

“Eight knows them.”

That was a new name. “Who’s Eight?”

El got a sad look in her eyes as she said, “Sister.”

“Your sister?”

“In Lab.”

“There are... there are more... more powered people in the Lab?”

El blinked at him, confused. “P-powered?”

Mike paused, then said, “People who can do... special things.”

El held out her hand, and Nancy’s book flew off the floor. She caught it, and then turned to him, not reacting to his startled expression.

He stuttered. “Y-y-yeah. Like that. Are... are there other people like that in the Lab?”

“Eight. And a boy.” El paused. “New boy.”

So, the Lab had powered children inside them. Were they studying the kids? “What... uh, what were they doing to you in there?”

El froze, dropping her waffle and staring into space, fear reflected in her eyes. Mike immediately realized that he had overstepped his bounds, and he quickly said, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I’m sorry, I shouldn’t’ve... are you alright?”

El knew that Mike was still talking to her, but he suddenly seemed so far away.

“What were they doing to you in there?”

What hadn’t they done to her in there? She had her hair shaved off every few months, wires strapped to her head as they made her move whatever they wanted, as they made her shut her eyes and track people down and repeat what they said, shoving her into the Bath if that person was far away. If she was too sick, or too tired, or if she simply didn’t want to do anything, it was Solitary. And Papa wouldn’t do anything while she was in Solitary. He wouldn’t help her.

She remembered only a short time ago, when they had an animal in front of her- she thought it was called a cat. They wanted her to hurt it.

“Hurt?” she’s asked, staring up at Papa as men strapped the wires to her head.

“Just to see if you can.”

But she couldn't. The Cat looked at her, and it was so pretty, and it hadn't done anything bad. It hadn't hurt her, she doubted it could hurt anyone. So she reached up and ripped the wires out, shaking her head.

She was almost thrown in Solitary for that. She'd been dragged down the hall, screaming and crying. But once they'd thrown her down, she'd turned around to stare at the guards. They were going to close the door. She didn't want them to close the door. She wasn't going to let them.

She'd focused on the men, and cocked her head, and they fell to the ground.

She'd passed out after that, and Papa let her stay in her room instead of Solitary. Now he knew her powers could hurt. She wondered if he didn't punish her because he knew what she could do if they tried again, or if she'd completed the test after all.

But she did know that she never saw those two guards again.

And that definitely scared her.

“Hey! Hey, are you okay?”

El finally moved, looking down to notice that Mike had grabbed her hands. “Sorry...” she said quietly.

“No, no, it's not your fault, I shouldn't've asked. That was rude.” Mike said. “I just... I've kinda been watching the Lab for a while, I thought that they were just studying powers, I didn't know they were studying powered kids. That's really fucked up, I'm sorry.”

“Fucked up?”

Shit, he probably shouldn't have taught her how to swear. “Uh... nevermind. Hey, we're gonna have the house to ourselves all day, is there anything you want to do?”

El gave him a confused look, and he said, “How about this, I'll show you some cool stuff, and tonight we'll discuss our plan for whatever we're doing, okay?”

She nodded.

“Great!” Mike jumped to his feet, smiling brightly. “We’ll start with video games.”

“And this is *Star Wars*.”

Mike was flipping through TV Channels, with a fascinated El sitting next to him. On the screen before them, Luke and Darth Vader were having a duel with their lightsabers.

“Pretty.” El said.

“Yeah, it’s pretty cool.” Mike nodded.

They watched for another minute, but El quickly got bored and got off the couch, wandering off. Mike jumped up to follow her; she walked over to one of the bookshelves, staring at a family photo.

“Yeah, that’s my Dad.” Mike pointed out. “And my Mom. There’s my sisters, Nancy and Holly.”

“Sisters.” El repeated, narrowing her eyes, and then turning to Mike. “Look like you.”

“Uh, well, yeah.” Mike shrugged.

El turned back to the photos, scanning school pictures of the kids, wedding pictures of his parents, and Christmas Cards from relatives. Her eyes fell on one photo, though, and she suddenly paled.

It was a picture of four boys around a small gold trophy. One was clearly Mike- he thought he still had that sweater somewhere, honestly. Next to him was Dustin, with his curly hair and baseball cap, and then there was Lucas, who was giving the camera a thumbs-up. And on the other side of the frame was Will, who was smiling awkwardly; he didn’t really like being in pictures.

“Oh, that’s just me and the AV Club.” Mike shrugged. “We’re kinda the nerds of the school, but we won the Science Fair last year. We

can't really hang out that much, though, except for Will. Lucas and Dustin live on the other side of town, and Max only moved a few months ago, and I don't really like her all that much. She's not in the picture, cause that photo was from before-"

He stopped talking when he saw El point to Will, her finger just centimeters from the glass. She seemed intensely focused on him, looking... nervous.

"Do you... do you know Will?" Mike asked awkwardly.

El slowly turned to him; her face had gone pale. "Brother."

"What?"

She pointed to Will again. "Brother."

"No, no, Will's got one brother, I don't think he has..."

El shook her head. "In Lab."

He suddenly felt very, very cold. "What?"

"Brother." El repeated, her voice going quiet. "He was in the Lab."

Notes for the Chapter:

Honestly writing Mileven fluff is super fun. Unfortunately, there's gonna be a lot more angst coming up than fluff... :D

I think I might make the next chapter's update time later, too. I haven't been getting very many comments/hits with the regular posting time, so I think I might try 3:30-4:00 tomorrow...

6. Even in other universes, Will Byers cannot catch a Break

CHAPTER SIX

Even in other universes, Will Byers cannot catch a Break

Mike had told El to stay in the house and go into his room if anyone came home, and then he biked to the Byers House as fast as he could.

He parked his bike in the yard, his panic increasing once he saw that a Police Car was parked in the driveway.

“Shit!” he yelled, running up to the door and ringing the bell. “Shit! Shit!”

The door opened, and Mike looked up at a worried Jonathan Byers. “Oh, uh, Mike, we were just about to call-”

“Is Will here?” Mike asked, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

Jonathan’s expression was the answer he needed.

Mike immediately pushed past him, running into the house. “Will!” he called. “Will!”

He rushed into the kitchen, where several people looked up at him in alarm. Joyce Byers was wringing her hands at the circular table, and next to her were Lucas, Dustin and Max. Standing on the other side of the table was Chief Jim Hopper.

“Where’s Will?” Mike asked again, as he heard Jonathan run up behind him. “What happened?”

“Kid, calm down.” Hopper said, holding out his hands in a calming gesture.

“Do you know where he is?” Joyce asked, looking up at him.

“Where is he? What’s going on?”

“He... he didn’t come home last night. We thought he might be with you guys.” Jonathan said.

“He *was* with us.” Lucas explained. “And he... he decided to walk home alone, and we haven’t seen him since.”

“You don’t think he’s hurt, do you?” Joyce asked, her eyes widening.

“Don’t worry, Ms. Byers.” Dustin said, forcing a smile onto his face. “Will’s really strong. He’ll be okay.”

Mike was starting to feel cold again. Everything they said, everything that he heard, was starting to make him feel worse.

“I... I’ve gotta go.” Mike started to backtrack, heading towards the foyer again.

“Hey, wait a minute, kid!” Hopper said. “Do you know anything?”

“No.”

That was an outright lie, and Mike knew that everybody knew it. But he couldn’t tell them. He couldn’t tell them about El, in case they tried to take her back, and he couldn’t tell them about going to the Lab, because then they’d want to know why he was there, and he *couldn’t* tell them that. He *couldn’t*.

“I’ve gotta go, I- I’ll call you if I hear anything.” Mike said again, and then he ran.

As he biked home, Mike thought back to every interaction he’d had with Will the past few months. Could anything- *anything*- that Will had said be interpreted as him having powers?

He did always seem nervous at the mentions of superpowered people, but he was nervous around a lot of things. And there was a point, last week, where Will had tried to tell him something. He’d said that it was important, and not to think badly of him, but then he’d backed

out at the last moment. Mike had thought he'd understood, and told him that he'd be there when he was ready to tell him... but honestly, he just thought Will was going to come out. Now that he was thinking about it, though, he could've just as easily been talking about being a superhuman... god *damnit*.

He reached the apartment, and tied up his bike to the rack, before rushing up towards the elevator. He bounced on his feet the whole way up, trying to will the elevator to go faster. Once he reached his apartment, he tapped on the door so that El would know it was him, and then he stuck his key into the lock, trying to turn it as fast as he could.

Once he got inside, he slammed the door and said, “El! El, we need to talk!”

El looked up from the couch as Mike rushed over, and then he dropped in front of her, kneeling on the floor. “El! El, okay, listen, you said you saw Will at the Lab?”

El flinched, but nodded.

“What happened? Do you know how he got there?”

El shut her eyes, and Mike thought for a second that maybe he'd pushed her too far again, but then she said, “E-Eight said... off the street. They got him? Off the street.”

Oh, shit.

“Wh-what was he doing?”

“Colors.” El said, after considering for a minute. “He took colors and made them powers.”

What the hell does that mean? It kind of sounded like the boy that he and Max had seen fight, but... no, no, that couldn't be Will...

“Oh, oh my gosh.” Mike started breathing hard, moving to sit next to El on the couch. “Oh, my gosh, Will's in the Lab. They got Will.”

He took a deep breath, and then said, “Okay. Okay, we need a plan,

we need a plan to get him out..."

"No."

Mike turned to look at her, disbelief in his eyes. "What?"

"No." She shook her head wildly, looking terrified.

Mike paused, then said, "Listen, I know it's scary there, but we can't leave Will. You don't have to come if you don't want, but I'm getting him the hell out of there."

El stared at him for a second, still looking terrified, and then Mike heard footsteps running in the hall.

"*Shit!*" Mike yelled, and he grabbed El, pushing her into another room. "Stay here, someone's coming!"

He barely managed to shut El in before he heard the door behind him fly open, and he whipped around to see the last person on Earth he expected to be standing in his apartment.

"Alright, shithead," Max said, "Where the *hell* is Will?"

"How did you find out where I live?" Mike asked, bewildered.

"Stole your contact info from Dustin's phone." Max rolled her eyes, walking right up to him and staring him in the eyes, crossing her arms. "Where's Will?"

"I... I don't know, go away!" Mike shook his head.

"Don't play dumb, Wheeler!" Max yelled back. "You know something! Are you hiding him?"

"What? No, I'm not hiding anyone-"

"Is there something wrong with him? Did he do something?"

"No, he's not here, Max! I don't know where he is, I would've told you guys if I did!"

"Bullshit, Wheeler! You know something!"

Max reached forwards, pushing Mike back a little. Mike stumbled, glaring down at her. “Damn it, Max! What’s wrong with you?”

“Where’s Will?” There was a quiet desperation in her voice, something that made Mike feel a little bad for not telling her, but he couldn’t, not yet, not if it meant endangering El. “Where *the hell* is Will?”

She jumped forwards and pushed him again. “I can’t tell you, Max!” Mike finally said. “I swear to God, I can’t tell you!”

“Where *is* Will?”

Max moved forwards to push him again, and then in a flash, she was thrown against the wall by some invisible force. She hit the wall and then crumpled to the ground, letting out a loud and startled cry. Mike whipped around, to see El standing behind him, her hand outstretched and pointed towards Max.

“El? Why did you do that?” Mike asked, his terror causing his voice to rise. El flinched, and Mike immediately felt bad for yelling. “I- I’m sorry. Why did you do that?”

“She hurt you.” El said simply.

“Wheeler?” Mike whipped around, to see that Max was staring up at them. “Who the *fuck* is that?”

“Who are you?” El said harshly, moving forwards and standing next to Mike, grabbing his arm as if preparing to push him back.

“Wheeler, why doesn’t she have any hair?” Max asked, staring her down. “Did she... did she throw me? Is she powered-”

“Her name is El, and she can hear you!” Mike shouted back.

“Who *is* she?”

Before Mike could answer, he heard more footsteps in the hall. His eyes widened in terror, and he grabbed onto El’s arm. “El! Someone else is coming! You gotta hide! Go in my room and *stay there!*”

“But-” El said, as Mike started pushing her out of the room again.

“Stay. There.” Mike said, and he successfully got her out and turned to Max. “Max, please, don’t tell them that she’s here, please, you can’t-”

“Why not? Who is she?” Max asked.

The footsteps were getting closer. “I don’t have time,” Mike said quickly, “But she’s in danger, and she can help us find Will, just *please don’t say anything.*”

Max paused, looking between him and the door, as it slowly cracked open. “I-”

She took a deep breath, and then she ran up to stand next to Mike—she ran *really* fast, Mike noticed, getting to his side by the time the door had opened, and Karen walked in, holding hands with Holly and looking surprised to see the children in the room in front of her.

“Michael?” Karen asked, looking curiously at Max. “Who’s this?”

Shit. Shit. Shit. “Oh, uh, this is Max. We were...” Mike turned to Max, panic in his expression.

Max looked at him for a second, clearly thinking over what she wanted to say. Mike tried to plead with her with his eyes, tried to ask her that she *please* not give El away. *Please.*

Max sighed, turned to Karen and said, with a sickeningly sweet smile, “Oh! Sorry, Ms. Wheeler. We were working on our science project and I offered to walk Mike home. My Mom’s gonna be home late, do you mind if I stay here a while?”

“Oh! Well, of course you can stay, dear!” Karen said, smiling at her as she put Holly on the ground. “I was just going to make Dinner, you can stay as long as you want.”

“Thanks, Ms. Wheeler!” Max said, a bright smile still on her face—God, she was a surprisingly good actor. “Mike, you were gonna show me your books?”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah.” Mike nodded. “We’ll just... we’ll just go, then.”

“Oh, is Nancy in her room?” Karen asked, looking up as she walked towards the kitchen area. “Can you ask her to watch Holly for a bit while I’m cooking?”

Shit. Nancy wasn’t home yet. He could probably text her to tell her to sneak in, so she didn’t get scolded for leaving him alone. Mike paused, then said, “You know, I think Holly can watch herself. She’ll be fine if she stays in the apartment, right?”

Karen considered, then said, “You know, I’ll just have her play in here. You two go have fun.”

“Right, thanks!” Max grabbed Mike’s hand and started dragging him out of the room. Once they were out, she whispered, “That was way too fucking close, Wheeler.”

“You did that way too well.” Mike whispered back.

“I have experience lying to parents.” Max said simply. “Now, take me to the superkid. I’d like an explanation, please.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: I get to write Max and Mike planning to take down a government institution by themselves

7. Mike and Max plan to break into Government Property

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mike and Max plan to break into Government Property

Mike pushed Max into his room ahead of him, before shutting the door and turning around. El was sitting on his bed and still glaring at Max, who was staring at her in pure fascination.

“So, you’re a powered kid?” Max asked, moving a bit closer to her. El flinched back, giving Mike a quick look.

“She’s not a zoo exhibit, Max, leave her alone.” Mike said, grabbing her arm.

“I never said she *was*.” Max groaned, glaring at him but not going closer towards the girl. “Who is she, anyway?”

“Uh, her name’s El.” Mike said, glancing at the girl. “And she’s kinda... hiding in my room?”

“Why?”

Mike paused. “Uh... she kinda escaped from Hawkins Lab?”

Max blinked at him, and then moved to sit on his desk chair. “Okay. Okay... uh, that’s that weird place right outside of town, right?”

“Yeah.” Mike nodded.

“And she escaped from there?”

“Yeah.”

“Is... is she a clone or something?”

“What?” Mike shook his head. “What? No, I...” he turned to El. “You

aren't, are you?"

El shrugged.

"I think that's an 'I don't know'." Mike said.

"Oh, wonderful." Max groaned. "So you're an escapee from a Lab, probably grown in a test tube, and now you're hiding with *Mike Wheeler* of all people. *And* you're a powered kid?"

El glanced at Mike, as if asking for help. Mike slowly moved to sit next to her, and then said, "Listen, don't... don't overwhelm her. She's had a rough..." Day? Week? Year? "...life."

"K, how long has she been here?" Max asked, looking between them.

"Uh... I brought her back here at like, midnight this morning?"

"Wow, you couldn't even hide her for a day." Max said. "You need to get better at this."

"Hey!"

Max rolled her eyes. "I can hide her at my place, my parents won't notice-

"No." El said sharply and immediately.

Max jumped, surprised. After a second, though, she shrugged it off and said, "Well, uh, okay... so, what does she have to do with Will?"

"He's... he's at the Lab."

Max stared at him in horror. "What?"

"He's... he's got powers. And he's at the Lab."

The redhead took a deep breath, shut her eyes, and said, "You better be fucking shitting me, Wheeler."

"I wish I was." Mike said. "El says she saw him."

Max looked to the girl. "Are you sure?"

El nodded. “I saw him.”

“And you’re sure it was him?”

El gave her a dark glare. “*I saw him.*”

Max returned her stare, and then looked to Mike. “So, what’s our plan?”

“Plan?”

“To get Will out.”

Mike hesitated for a second; was he really planning on breaking a kid out of a government lab? But his doubts didn’t last long; that was *Will* in there. The Lab had hurt El, and they were going to hurt him. He had to help.

“I don’t know, I only found out he was in the Lab a little bit ago.” he admitted, and he glanced to El. “Do you... do you know how to get in?”

El got a terrified look in her eyes, and she shook her head wildly.

Max glared at her for a second, and then turned to Mike. “Where’d you pick her up?”

“Uh, I was outside the... the Lab... and she kinda... escaped...” Mike said.

“Why were *you* outside the Lab?”

“I’ve...” Mike felt a surge of panic rise in his chest; she couldn’t know why he was there, right? “I’ve been watching it. Wanted to know... to know what was going on there, you know? *Apparently* it’s some weird human experimentation shit... I mean, I guess...”

“Hmm.” Max had a suspicious look on her face, but she asked, “What’ve you been doing? Just... staring at the building? Watching the paint dry?”

“I’m not as boring as you are, Mayfield.” Mike rolled his eyes,

jumping up and running to one of his bottom drawers. He opened it, reaching underneath the t-shirts and opening up the false bottom.

“Wicked!” Max muttered as she saw the hidden compartment. Mike tried to force himself not to smile; it was cool to impress someone, even if it had been Nancy’s idea to make fake bottoms to stash junk food in and not his. He could see El’s eyes light up too, which made his smile a lot harder to hide for some reason.

Mike pulled out a small yellow binder, one that looked simple enough to be for some kind of school subject. He opened it, dropping it on the bed and waiting for Max to walk over and look down at it before he started flipping through the pages. El looked, too, but she seemed more confused than Max.

“Wow, Wheeler, you’re a lot fucking cooler than you look.” Max said.

El narrowed her eyes, looking curiously at the papers. Mike glanced at her, and then explained, “It’s, uh, observations on the Lab. When the cars come and go, what the patrols seem to be like. I’m sure there’s security cameras inside, but they’re probably the same brand as the camera on the outside, and that brand doesn’t function well in storms; I looked them up, they black out a lot when there’s a lot of electricity.”

“Well, then, it makes sense why they haven’t got a hold on that lightning kid.” Max said. “He’d be able to disable their security really fucking easily.”

It took Mike a second to remember who she was talking about. “Oh, yeah.”

“How long have you been spying on them?” Max asked.

“About a month.”

Max considered, then pulled her phone out of her pocket, silent for a moment as she pulled something up. Finally, she said, “There’s a thunderstorm on the 10th. Only two days away.”

“You think we should break in then?” Mike asked.

“And leave Will in there for two days while we sit on our asses?” Max rolled her eyes. “No. We need electricity. And who has a shitton of electricity?”

“That powered kid?”

“Exactly. And he knows us, didn’t seem too bothered when we talked to him.” Well, that was definitely a stretch. “I bet we could find some sort of crime going on and track him down-”

“And he can shut down the cameras.” Mike completed, finally getting her point. “And once they’re down, we go into the Lab.”

“Hmm, I think just me. I’d be able to get in and out a lot faster than you.” Max said.

“What? No, no, I wanna go in and find Will.”

“Look, just one of us going in there is risky. I know how to sneak around places, I can get in and out pretty damn fast- *really* damn fast, trust me. I... kinda have to, I need to know how to get around my stepbrother.” There was something in Max’s voice that put Mike a little on edge, as if she was keeping something from him, but he shrugged it off as she kept talking. “I can get in, find Will, and get out before you could even find your way to the elevator, especially if the security cameras are off.”

“So what do you want me to do? Sit and wait for you to get yourself killed?”

“You watch the door, asshole.” Max rolled her eyes. “Make sure nobody unexpected drops by, keep an eye on the cameras and on her.”

She gestured to El, and Mike glanced to her. She looked a little scared, and he didn’t blame her; they were talking about breaking into the place she’d just escaped from. “Hey, are you okay?” he asked.

El looked at him, and then said, “No.”

She raised her hand, and the binder flew off the bed, hitting the wall

and falling to the floor.

“Hey, what the *fuck*?” Max jumped.

“El, why did you do that?” Mike asked.

“Bad place.” El said, as Max started to move to grab the binder. El cocked her head, and the binder flew away from them again, landing on the other side of the room. “Bad place. You can’t go.”

“We have to get to Will!” Max protested.

“Bad place!” El yelled. “No!”

Mike moved over to El, reaching forwards and grabbing her hands. “El! El, listen!”

El looked up at him, and Mike stared her in the eyes, seeing the terror reflected in them. She really was horrified at the idea of them going back to that place. He took a deep breath, tried to keep his face calming, and said, “Listen. We’re not asking you to go back there. I’m going to make sure that you *never* go back there.”

He had no idea how he was supposed to do that, but he would rather die than let them drag her back to a place that could scare her so much. She looked up at him in surprise, as he continued, “But we can’t leave Will in there either. You said there was another person in there? Eight?”

El nodded, quietly saying, “Sister.”

“We can get her out, too. We’ll get them all out, and then we can get you somewhere safe.” he assured her. “But we have to take a chance. We can’t let Will stay in there, and we can’t let Eight stay in there. Those people who did this stuff to you, we can’t let them keep doing... doing that. We can’t, we have to help. Please, just... just let us help.”

El looked between him and Max, and Mike wondered for a second if she was going to cry. Then, she quietly said, “I can help.”

She held out her hand, and the binder flew to her. She opened it,

staring down at the papers, and then handed it to Mike. He looked at her, hoping to God that he deserved the trust she was giving to him.

“Well,” Max said, breaking the uncomfortable silence, “If we can’t get to the Lightning Kid, we’ve got two days minimum. We need to start planning.”

“Yeah.” Mike nodded, glancing down at his papers. Oh, God, they were really doing this. “Yeah, let’s get to work.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: Max has to sit through a Wheeler Family dinner, and we get to see what's been going on with our favorite Missing Boy.

8. Some Nice Moments before Everything Goes to Shit

CHAPTER EIGHT

Some Nice Moments before Everything Goes to Shit

Mike glanced across the table at the rest of his family; Karen kept looking between him and Max, who was kicking him under the table, probably worried that either he or she would fall asleep. Holly was picking at her food again, Nancy was once again reading at the table, and Ted seemed completely unaware that anything was different. Just like always.

“So, Max,” Karen asked, drawing the attention of the children, “What were you and Mike working on?”

“Just science stuff.” Max said politely. “It was mostly Lucas, actually, he’s real smart, but we helped. What I want to know is what Nancy’s reading, it looks interesting.”

Nancy jumped at the mention of her name. She eventually shrugged off the surprise and said, “*Turn of the Screw.*”

“Oh? What’s it about?”

Nancy snorted. “Your parents won’t let you read it.”

“I don’t think they’ll care.” Max shrugged.

“What is in that book?” Karen asked, a little concerned.

“Nothing.” Nancy rolled her eyes.

Max gave Mike a quick look, and he shrugged. *Just finish eating, and then you can go*, he wanted to say, but he had to settle for trying to communicate that with his look.

Most of dinner went pretty normally- that was, in complete silence despite Karen’s occasional attempt at conversation. Thankfully, Max

seemed to understand this routine, as she didn't try to say anything unless she was asked.

Unfortunately, towards the end, Nancy finished her food and ran off to her room to call Barb or Steve or someone, and Karen managed to find a new conversation starter.

"Did you see those powered boys on the news again?"

Mike and Max had both flinched and refused to look at each other, hoping that neither of the adults would notice their flashes of fear.

"It was only the two of them this time, but they were on TV again, apparently broke into the police station. Can you imagine?"

Max reached over to grab Mike's hand under the table, and he squeezed it almost involuntarily. Neither of them were quite sure why, though they both tried to convince themselves that they were just worried for El.

"Those powered kids are getting too bold." Ted said. "Think they're better than us, just because they've got weird magic tricks."

Neither of Mike's parents noticed him start to grip harder to Max's hand until his knuckles were white and she started to wonder if he was going to rip her arm off.

"I just feel sorry for them." Karen shook her head. "Poor kids think they're special, but you know what that official report said, those powers will overwhelm them unless they can find a cure. They're just a bunch of sick teenagers, hopefully that Lab outside of Town'll actually finish their studies."

Max glanced over at Mike, to see that his face had gone just as white as hers. He didn't look at her, though, instead choosing to keep his face towards the table and shutting his eyes as hard as he could.

A door slammed behind them, and just like that, the conversation ended.

"I'm going to Barb's!" Nancy called, a bag slung over her shoulder.

“What?” Karen turned around, probably to ask her daughter what exactly she was doing, and Max took that opportunity.

“Lovely dinner, Ms. Wheeler.” Max smiled, standing up. “But I should really go now, too. Maybe you can walk me outside, Nance?”

“Sure, why not?” Nancy shrugged. “I can walk you home, I think it’s on the way.”

“It’s not.” Max shook her head. “Thanks for the homework help, Michael.”

“N-no problem.” Mike smiled, also standing up. “I think I’m gonna go to my room, too. See you all in the morning, I guess...”

The two kids gave each other a quick look, and then they left.

“Sorry about that, I managed to sneak you some more food.” Mike said, rushing into the room and jumping onto the bed as El crept out of the closet. “Just shoved some bread into my jacket while nobody was looking, I don’t think anyone noticed. Max left so you don’t have to deal with her bullshit anymore, and-”

“Mike.” El interrupted, and Mike jumped.

“Yeah? Do you need anything? Are you hurt? Are-”

El gave him a look. “Scared?”

“What are you scared of? Is the... the plan? We can-”

El shook her head, and then pointed to him. “Scared.”

Oh.

Mike laughed it off, shaking his head. “No, no, I’m fine.”

El narrowed her eyes, and Mike knew there was no lying to her. He sighed and sat on his bed, handing her the bread he’d smuggled her as she sat next to him. “Look, it’s not because of... of the plan. I get

why you'd be scared but... I *can't* be scared about that, not when Will's in trouble- I've gotta help him. But... well..."

He didn't want to throw her into the world, tell her only a day into her freedom that people were going to hate her for being able to do things. She clearly hadn't been out in the world since infancy, if even that, and he didn't want to be the one to tell her that powered kids were more known to disappear off the streets than to do anything good.

"Well... my parents just... don't understand a lot of things. And it's hard just sitting there and listening, because I know that if I argue, they'll just get mad at me and they won't listen. They say they'll listen but they *never* do."

That seemed like a dumb problem, especially compared to all of hers. So he was surprised when she reached over and put her hand over his. She didn't need to say anything else.

Mike sighed, and then turned to her. "Anyway, once we get Will and Eight out, we'll bring them back here, and we can... gosh, I don't think I can hide three people in here. I think I might be able to bring Will home, but..." Well, the Lab could really easily kidnap him again from there. "Maybe we could take Max up on her offer. I bet if she thinks she could hide someone..."

"Eight has people." El said. "To go to."

Mike wasn't sure whether she meant Eight specifically or *Eight and herself*, but he was really hoping it was the former. He didn't really want El to leave, though he didn't exactly know *why*, and he knew that it would probably be best if she was somewhere else.

"Oh?" he said, instead of voicing his thoughts. "She's got friends?"

El gave him a confused look, and then asked, "F-friends?"

Shit. She'd never had friends. Goddamnit.

"A-a, well, a friend is..." Mike stumbled over his words, a little thankful that she seemed to be very patiently waiting for him to finish. "A friend is someone you'd do anything for. You take care of

them, and spend time with them, and you never break a promise. And... and you don't lie."

He hoped El didn't notice him shaking a little as he said that last sentence. Friends didn't lie... but Will did. Will had powers, and he hadn't told them. And there were things that Mike hadn't told his friends either- for example, hiding a girl in his house.

"So..." he said quietly. "Eight's got friends?"

El said, "Me."

Mike smiled a little, and then froze when she added, "You."

He was still for a second, and he felt El stiffen a little, wondering if she'd said something wrong or crossed a line. He slowly turned to her, and then smiled and said, "Yeah. And you're my friend, too."

El smiled back at him, her eyes lighting up. "Friends." she repeated.

She glanced towards his drawer, then- the drawer where he'd hidden the binder. He noticed her discomfort, knew she was thinking about that Lab.

"I'll keep you safe." Mike promised her. "You're my friend. I promise."

I'll keep her safe.

She's my friend.

Will was crying. Again.

It was the second night, he thought. He could only see the windows on occasion, when he peered through the right vent. He'd been crawling around the vents for quite a long time now, thankful to everyone in Heaven that the vents happened to be big enough for him to be able to move and breathe. He could even sit up in some areas.

He'd woken up while being carried into the Lab. He figured some guard forgot to tranq him again, or maybe they just assumed the first knockout they gave him was enough. Or maybe they thought he'd just give up once he was in the building.

Well, they didn't know him very well.

He'd thrown everything he could at them, used all the powers he could muster, ignoring his body's pleas to stop, ignoring the tiredness that was struggling to take him over. Finally, he'd managed to use a wall of ice to block himself off for long enough for him to scramble into the vents. He'd stayed there, breathing hard and shaking and trying not to cry or make noise as the soldiers started yelling to try and find him. He could only hope that the ice had blocked off the view of the soldiers and the security cameras, leaving them clueless to where he might be. But if they knew he was in the vents, they would've done something about it.

He was starting to feel incredibly tired. He needed something to eat. He'd sucked some energy from his green shirt to make some plants to eat, but that wasn't as filling as, well, *actual* food. And he hadn't had water in hours; he'd managed to summon water from the air after draining some blue from his jeans, but it tasted awful and he'd passed out pretty soon afterwards. He thought he'd heard that you could only survive three days without water. Well, in that case, he was probably going to need to find some source of food fast. Either that, or he needed to get out of the Lab.

He'd been wandering around the vents, when he hadn't been crying or sleeping or trying to stay as still as he could because someone might be beneath him. He hadn't yet found a way out- if the worst came to the worst, though, he supposed he could jump into an empty hallway and make a run for the windows, but that was a bad plan for multiple reasons, as he didn't really feel like jumping down God knew how many floors, no matter what powers he had with him at the moment, and even if he survived, he thought there was an electric fence outside, one he wouldn't be able to cross. He'd tried redirecting Cyclone's electricity a couple of times, and it had just ended up shocking him. He didn't want to know what *dangerous* electricity could do.

He was crawling through the vents now, peering through the small filters to glance into other rooms- he usually saw empty labs or blindingly-white hallways, and occasionally he'd spot a person moving by, and he'd duck away and stay completely still for an hour to make sure they'd gone away before he moved again.

But, as he peered through the newest filter, one that was built into the wall, he saw something different.

It took him a second to see what was in the room; it was somehow darker than the vents themselves. But then his eyes adjusted, and he could see a girl curled in the corner. He froze, petrified, wondering if he should duck away but... she didn't seem to be a threat. In fact, she didn't seem to be any older than Jonathan. She wasn't dressed in all white like the doctors or soldiers, either; she was actually wearing quite dark clothing, and her hair was half-shaved. She looked mostly normal-

Oh.

She was like him, she had to be. She had powers, and they'd kidnapped her. She just hadn't been able to get away.

He wondered whether he should say something, but...

"There aren't any cameras here."

Shit.

Maybe she hadn't said it to him-

"I know you're there. I can hear you breathing."

Shit.

"Don't worry about the cameras." she said again, slowly turning to look at the vent, "There aren't any in here. The on-light would provide the room with, well, light. They want this to be as dark as possible. Nobody will see or hear you. You can talk to me."

Will hesitated, staring into the darkness. Finally, he said, with a sore voice, "Who are you?"

She sighed. “My name is Kali, but they call me Eight. Did they give you a number before you escaped?”

Will shook his head, then remembered that she probably couldn’t see him; she wasn’t even looking in his direction, and instead she was staring at the wall. “No. I’m Will.”

“Have you have food since you were brought in, Will?”

“Only what I can summon.” Will admitted.

“I haven’t, either. They only left me some water this morning, just to keep me alive. They’re waiting for me to be complacent, but that’s not going to happen, not while I’m still sane.” She paused, and then said, “How long have you been in the vents?”

“Since I got here and escaped.” Will said, his voice trembling a little. “I think it’s been two days.”

“You need food.” Kali said. “There is a kitchen here, I think it’s on the first floor, if it’s anything like the last Lab I was at before I- before I got out the first time. I doubt anyone would be in there, but the cameras might give you trouble.”

“I-If I have something black,” Will said, “I might be able to... to travel by shadow.”

“Travel by shadow?”

“It’s hard to explain, but I’ll be able to transport myself and things through darkness. I’ll be able to grab food real quickly, but I need something black to grab onto and drain.”

There was silence for a bit, and Will wondered if maybe he’d somehow said something offensive and Kali was now refusing to speak to him. However, after about a minute, Kali stood up, and walked over to the vent, peering through. Then, she took her jacket off, and held it up to the grate; it was so high up, she was barely able to reach.

“Will this work?”

A leather jacket would work *wonderfully*. Will said, “Y-yes! Thanks!” He reached forwards, looking at the color enough for his eyes to adjust to the light enough to see it, and then touched it. He felt a cold chill course through his body, like a shockwave of ice. It was hard to tell in the minimal light, but he knew that the power had been absorbed into him, and the jacket had turned gray.

“I’ll bring you food, too. Stuff I can fit through the vent.” he offered.

“Only if it’s safe.” Kali said quietly. “Don’t take too many risks; if they see you for even a second, you’re in trouble. And don’t worry. We’re going to get out of here.”

Will smiled. “I’ll be back soon.”

And then he shut his eyes, and let himself become enveloped by darkness, letting the lack of light guide him towards the place he needed to go.

While this place was still a shithole, it was nice to have someone who might be able to help him.

Two girls were in a tree outside of the Lab.

“Are you sure that window broke last night?” asked one skeptically, as she crawled towards the end of a branch.

“Yeah, they must’ve fixed it.” said the other, staring at her curiously. “Someone came down, jumped over the fence, and then ran into the woods. I lost sight of her there.”

“Jumped?” the girl on the branch raised an eyebrow. “Over the fence?”

“She was... powered.” There was a pause as the girls stared at each other. “Telekinetic, I think.”

“And she was escaping?”

“They must have been keeping her there against her will.”

“Do you think there are others?”

“There’ve gotta be.” the girl sighed. “I wish you’d been here.”

“I can’t sneak out as much as you. My window’s pretty hard to climb out of, and I might wake my siblings.” The more daring girl started crawling farther along the branch. “But don’t worry about that; if I can get close enough, I might be able to see in through the windows.”

“Get back! You’re going to fall!”

“I’m not going to fall. I need to see-”

At that moment, the branch snapped. The girl fell, letting out a scream, as her friend called for her.

“*Nancy!*”

The girl crashed on the ground, and looked up to see several lights pointed straight at her.

“Fuck.” Nancy said.

The other girl jumped down, grabbing her hand and pulling her up. “*Run!*” Barb yelled, and they took off into the woods.

Notes for the Chapter:

You might be wondering, "Midas, why do both of your Stranger Things AU fic series involve Kali and Will bonding?"

And I... I honestly have no idea. This just kinda... happens. They just kinda end up in the same place and on the same side.

Anyway, I've been really excited for this fic because I get to write Kali for more than six chapters. She's a really interesting character and honestly really fun to write, and it'll be nice for Will to have a friend, especially since, as the chapter title has proclaimed, things are going crazy pretty soon.

9. Everything Goes to Shit

CHAPTER NINE

Everything Goes to Shit

“Thank you, Will.” Kali said, as he passed a chocolate bar through the grate; it was the only thing that could fit. Will didn’t know why there’d be candy in the fridge- maybe for if the imprisoned children were obedient, maybe for one of the guards. Nevertheless, he was glad he grabbed it.

“It’s no problem, really. I’d have brought you a water bottle, too, but it wouldn’t fit. Maybe I can help you pry the metal off the grate-”

“I won’t fit in there.” Kali shook her head. “And the guards would notice if the vent was open. But they bring me water, because they don’t want me dead quite yet. Are you alright?”

“Yes. Nobody saw me, and the Shadow Power finally wore off.” Will said. “Your jacket should be back to normal in about five minutes.”

Kali nodded at him, and he would have said more, but then the alarms went off.

He froze when he heard the loud blares, a cold fear rising in him. He could see Kali stiffen a little, too, and then he asked, quietly, “Is it me? Did they find me?”

“I don’t think so.” Kali assured him, her voice dropping to a soft comfort. “I don’t think it’s you. If they found you, they wouldn’t alert you to that fact, they’d grab you from behind and knock you out before you could even suspect they might be behind you.”

“Like in town.” he whispered, trying not to think too hard about the feeling of arms grabbing him and throwing him into a trunk.

“Exactly. So, something else must be going on. Someone might have escaped or broke in or...” her voice trailed off, and it took a second

for her to say, “Or they found another powered child.”

No, no, no, that couldn’t be right. *That couldn’t be right.*

“I have friends. Friends in town. They couldn’t have-” Will started to shake.

Kali leaned up, reaching her hand towards the vent, and after a second, Will pushed his fingers through to touch hers. It was a small comfort, especially since they could barely touch, but it was something.

“You’ll be okay.” Kali said. “Try to get in the vents towards the Lab workers, find out what’s going on.”

“What if they hear me?”

“Try to breathe through your mouth, slowly, and you’ll be quieter. Do you need my jacket again?”

“I’ll... I’ll be fine...” Will said. “I’ll be back soon. Promise.”

As he left, he couldn’t hear anything going on outside the Lab. He couldn’t hear the gunshots, or the screaming, or the running.

So he didn’t know that Nancy Wheeler had been spotted.

Jonathan had awoken early to put up missing posters for Will before work, and as he walked around town and taped photos of him onto telephone poles and handed them to store owners, he felt a deep dread in his chest. There was no way that Will had run away or left voluntarily, at least not without giving them a message; he was too good a kid for that. So whatever had happened to him, he was in trouble, and Jonathan couldn’t bear the thought of him being hurt. He was such a quiet, sensitive kid... he didn’t want to think about what could possibly be keeping him away from his family. And he especially didn’t want to think about why, especially since Will was... different.

He was lost in his thoughts, taping a picture to the outside of the

Library, when he saw Nancy Wheeler turn the corner, running as fast as she could and sobbing.

Jonathan looked up at her, shocked, and reached out to grab onto her arm as she passed by; he wasn't sure *why*, it wasn't as if they were friends, he only really knew her from class and from when she came to pick Mike up from his house, but something seemed to be scaring her, and he wanted to make sure that she was okay.

"Nancy?" he asked, as she whipped around to stare at him. "What's going on?"

"Jonathan?" Nancy seemed shocked, and then she shook her head and gripped onto his arm, her eyes wide with terror. "Jonathan, please, you have to help me, I need somewhere to hide. We need to hurry, please, *help me!*"

Jonathan only hesitated for an instant, before grabbing onto her hand and pulling her into the Library doors. The second they were inside, he glanced around, looking for somewhere that might be empty, and pulled her into the single-stall bathroom, turning around and locking the door.

Nancy let go of his arm, and crumpled to the ground, grabbing her arms and continuing to sob. Jonathan stared at her for a minute, confused at what he was supposed to do, before he kneeled down in front of her. "Nancy? What's going on?"

She looked up at him, and said through her tears, "They killed her. Those bastards killed her."

"What?"

"Barb. They shot her. They fucking killed her... they fucking killed her and now they know who I am and what..."

What the fuck? Jonathan knew Barb less than he did Nancy; he knew that she was Nancy's best friend, and she didn't like parties, and that was about it. But who would want to *kill* her?

"Nancy, Nancy, please, you have to talk to me, I have to know what's going on." Jonathan reached down and grabbed her hands, trying to

steady her a little. She looked up into his eyes, still crying, and shook.
“Please, Nancy. I need to know what’s happening.”

She took a deep breath, and she said, “B-Barb and I were having a sleepover, and... and we went to Hawkins Lab, alright? We went to the fucking Lab because we thought that those superkids might be there, we wanted to talk to them, we needed to talk to them. We went to the fucking Lab and we tried to climb a tree to see what was inside, maybe scale the fence, and... and we got spotted, and we had to run, and they saw Barb... they saw her try to use the river to fight.”

“Use the river-?”

“She was *powered*, Jonathan! Shit, shit, she had powers! She could use manipulate water!” Nancy screamed, and Jonathan hoped that whoever was chasing her wasn’t anywhere nearby; they would *definitely* be able to hear her. “She was powered, and they saw her, and they tried to take her away, and I tried to fight them and they *saw* me and we almost got away and then they *shot her*. They shot her and she was bleeding and I wanted to stay but I had to go or they would’ve gotten to me, they *fucking killed her* and now they’re after me...”

Holy shit.

Holy shit.

“Wait, so that creepy Lab is going after you?”

“Yes, yes, they’re going after me. They saw me and they’re coming after me because I saw them kill her. Oh, God, they *killed her...*” Nancy looked like she was about to cry again, or maybe puke, but instead she froze. She looked up, and said, “They’re gonna go after my family. They’re gonna go to my house and... and *fuck*, they’re going to go after *him...*”

“Nancy, listen to me,” Jonathan said, looking down towards her, “I’m gonna make sure they don’t get to you, alright? But I need you to tell me something: was the Lab after Barb because she had powers?”

“B-because we saw them, but they only shot her when they saw her use her water... I don’t know if they meant to kill or just hurt her but it doesn’t *matter*...” Nancy said, reaching up to attempt to wipe her tears away with her sleeve. “S-Steve said that they were studying powers, so we thought...”

“Oh, God.” Jonathan said. If that place was killing people with powers...

“Jonathan, I need your phone.” Nancy said, still struggling to talk a little. “I need to call my brother.”

“Mike?” Jonathan asked, reaching into his pocket, starting to feel numb. “Why?”

“He... he doesn’t do very well with surprises, not after... after the accident.” Nancy took a deep, shaky breath, and then said, “I just, I need to warn him. Before the Lab finds him.”

El woke up early, staring up at the closet ceiling. She sat up and shook herself, glancing towards the light shining out of the open door to remind herself that she was safe. She stood up after a second, pushing the door open some more and peering out. Sunlight was shining through the windows, and she walked out, checking the other door like Mike had shown her; yes, it was still locked. He said that she could use the bathroom if she needed- it was through the other door- and she could read his books and play with his action figures if he was still asleep.

But, if he was *asleep*...

El crept towards the drawers, pulling one open and lifting up the false-bottom. She pulled the binder out, opening it up and scanning the pages. Mike had messy handwriting, and El wasn’t entirely sure she could read through it very well. She flipped through the pages, seeing diagrams and charts scattered throughout the notes. They were certainly quite detailed, she had to admit.

She looked down at the Binder, and wondered, for a second, if she

could just... make it disappear. If it fell out the window, or crumpled itself up, would Mike and Max still go to the Lab? Would they stay home and stay safe?

But, no. She couldn't. Not while Eight and Will were still there. She'd only gotten out because Eight had gone in for her. She needed to help her now.

El moved to put the Binder back, and then she heard Mike move behind her. She turned around, jumping and thinking that maybe he'd think she *was* destroying it, maybe he'd yell at her, maybe they wouldn't still be friends. However, at first, everything seemed to be alright. He was still in his bed, still asleep, but something was... wrong. He was shaking, now, and mumbling something. El stood up and got closer, and she started to hear what he was saying.

"Run. Run. Go! Go!"

El rushed over to him, grabbing his shoulders and trying to shake him awake. "Mike? Mike!"

"Don't touch the glass!"

She shook him some more, bending down to look in his face. What was wrong with him? "Mike!"

Finally, he shot up, suddenly awake. He was still shaking, his eyes wide and terrified. El jumped up onto the edge of the bed, facing him. "Mike?"

He turned to her, and after a second, he shut his eyes and shook his head, clearing it. He forced a smile, and said, "S-sorry. Nightmare. I- It's okay, I get them all the time..."

"Nightmare?" El asked quietly.

He bit his lip. "Bad dream. Scary dream. You know?"

Oh. She nodded, remembering back to all her creepy dreams. She'd definitely had those, no doubt about it.

"I... I'll be okay." Mike assured her. "How are you? Sleep well?"

She wasn't entirely sure how to respond to that, so she just stared at him until he shrugged and said, "Here, I'll be right back. Lemme get changed and stuff. Oh! I smuggled you a new dress, too, from Nancy's old stuff. It's under the bed, pretty easy to find."

He only left the room for about five minutes, and by the time he'd returned, El had stashed the binder back into the drawer and thrown the pink dress and shorts on that he'd hidden for her. Once he saw her, he froze for a second, staring at her in surprise. Finally, he managed to say, "Y-you look pretty."

Pretty? Nobody had ever told her that *she* was pretty before. She smiled at him, and his face turned a little red, for some reason.

After a second, she forced herself to focus on something else, and she asked, "Glass?"

He jumped a little, and said, "Wh-what?"

"Nightmare." she said. "You said, 'Don't touch the glass.' What is that?"

He flinched and glared down at the ground, stumbling in an attempt at a response. He probably hadn't realized he'd talked in his sleep. "W-w-well, it... it..."

Suddenly, his phone buzzed. He rushed forwards, grabbing it and looking. "I don't know this number?" he said, confused, and then he turned to El. "Just stay quiet. I'll see who it is. Might be Max."

He moved his thumb across the screen, and then held the phone up to his ear. "Yo?" After a second, his face immediately paled. "*Nancy?*"

He moved the phone, and pressed another button, and suddenly El could hear Nancy yelling. "-stay calm, okay? I just need you to stay calm."

"Why? What is this?" Mike asked. "What's going on?"

"Mike, I... I got in trouble with some Bad People, and they're probably coming to investigate the house. You should probably get out, now."

“Bad People? Who?”

There was a pause, before Nancy answered, “The- the people at that Lab outside of town.”

Both kids froze, staring at each other in horror.

“They’re dangerous, Mike, and you need to get out. Go to Lucas’s, or-”

“Thanks for the warning, Nance!” Mike interrupted. “Gotta go!”

He pressed a button to hang up, and then looked to El. “Grab a bag and throw the binder in it. We’ve got to go, *now!*”

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, I do have some unfortunate news.

I have a College Visit this week, and I won’t be able to bring my Laptop with me, meaning that I won’t be able to update. I’ll be gone this Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, so you’ll get the update tomorrow, and then be on hiatus until Saturday. Sorry about that!

On the plus side, I might be able to write ahead a bit more on my phone, and tomorrow’s chapter is a pretty decent cliffhanger.

Thanks for reading! :D

10. Max saves Everyone's asses

CHAPTER TEN

Max saves Everyone's asses

Mike and El rushed out of the building, holding each others' hands as they ran. Mike had a backpack slung over his shoulder, holding the Binder, two boxes of Eggos, three water bottles, and two changes of clothes, just in case. He figured he probably should've grabbed medicine or some kind of weapon or something, but they'd rushed out of the apartment as fast as they could. If the people from the Lab were coming to his place, Mike didn't want to be there, and he knew that El would want to be there a whole lot less. He was thankful to God that his Mom had taken Holly shopping with her and his Dad was at work, or else he'd have to explain to them why he and a strange girl were running away.

There was only one other thing they'd stopped for while in the house. Mike figured that a lot of people would notice a girl with shaved hair, which would unfortunately make her easier to identify if someone asked around town for her. So he dug into the box of their Halloween costumes, pulling out a blonde wig that Nancy had used when she dressed up as Sailor Venus a few years back. He'd thrown it onto El's head, chopped a few inches off the bottom with the kitchen scissors, and then dragged her out the door.

"We need to get to Max." Mike said quickly, once they were outside. "I don't know where she lives, but I think Lucas does- at the very least, he can text her for us."

El didn't respond, instead glancing over her shoulder at the building and shaking, as if the Bad Men were already inside and watching her.

"Don't worry," Mike said, trying to keep his own panic out of his voice, "They won't get to you. I won't let them. But we can trust Lucas. Come on."

He managed to find his bike outside, unchaining it from the rack and jumping on. El hesitated for only a second before getting on the seat behind him, throwing her arms around him and holding on as he started to move as fast as he could.

By the time they got to Lucas's house, El was already terrified. The city was loud and bright and there were more people than she'd probably seen before in her life- if Mike's assumption about her being in the Lab since infancy was correct. He was a little scared that she wouldn't let go of him once they passed through the city and stopped in the more suburban area of Hawkins, which still contained a lot of noise from the streets a few feet away and the cars rushing past. Thankfully, she did get off, and Mike took a second to help her re-adjust the wig before he ran to the door and knocked, bouncing on his feet as he waited.

The door opened, and an eight-year-old girl looked up at them. "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Hi, Erica!" Mike said, smiling and hoping that Lucas's sister didn't notice that he was terrified. "I need to talk to Lucas. Can we come in?"

"Who's *that*?" Erica asked, pointing to El.

"This is my friend, her name's El. She's with me today. Please, Erica, can we come in?"

Erica paused, considering. "What's the password?"

Mike let out a groan, and before he could answer, Lucas ran in from another room. "Erica, what the hell? Let him in!"

"Whatever you say, Lukey. Now that they're here, the TV's *mine*." Erica rolled her eyes, rushing off.

Lucas sighed and turned to Mike, and his confused gaze fell on El. "Who's this? What's going on?"

"Lucas, we need to get inside. Now." Mike said. "Please."

Lucas glanced between them, and then he said, “Okay.”

El seemed to enjoy Lucas’s house; she stared, wide-eyed, at the large rooms, seemed fascinated by the photos lining the stairwell, and kept glancing in the direction of the Living Room, where Erica was watching a cartoon, until Mike dragged her upstairs and into Lucas’s room.

“Okay, what’s going on?” Lucas asked, glaring at El. “Why’s she got Nancy’s anime wig?”

“Lucas, I swear I will explain everything,” Mike said carefully, “But I don’t have much time, and I need you to call Max for me. You have her number?”

Lucas nodded, giving him a skeptical look before running to his nightstand and unplugging his phone from the charger. “What’s this for?”

“It’s an emergency, Lucas, I need to call her!” Mike rolled his eyes. “Please!”

After hesitating for a second, Lucas unlocked his phone and started pulling up his apps. Mike bounced up and down as he waited, and El moved to sit down on Lucas’s bed, staring at Mike with concern.

Finally, Lucas handed his phone to Mike, and in a second, Max answered. “Lucas? Hi!”

“Max, it’s Mike!” Mike said, his voice rising a little as he talked. “Max, they’re after us.”

“What?” Max asked.

“What?” Lucas looked panicked.

“Nancy did something to piss them off,” Mike said, “A-and they’re coming to the apartment. We need to hide at your place.”

Max was silent for a good minute, and Mike wondered if maybe

something had gone wrong with the connection, and then she said, “I’m on my way. Is there a place I should-?”

“Lucas’s house, please hurry.” Mike said, and then he hung up and tossed the phone back to Lucas. “I’m staying with El. Tell Dustin that I’m safe.”

“Mike, what the hell are you talking about?” Lucas asked. “Who’s after you?”

“Bad men.” El finally said, staring at the wall.

“Who is *this*?” Lucas asked, gesturing to the girl.

“Lucas,” Mike said, “I need you to listen to me, okay? I’m not fucking kidding, this is serious shit.”

“Okay, fine.” Lucas crossed his arms. “What the hell’s going on?”

Mike took a deep breath. “The creepy lab outside of town- you know? Hawkins Lab- it’s doing experiments on superpowered kids, and El escaped from there. She’s hiding with me, and now we’re running from them. Max knows because she broke into my house, and we’ve gotta hide with her.”

Lucas stared at him with an odd look on his face- he looked much more scared than confused. There was a bit of silence for a bit, and then Lucas asked, “Did... did you say that they’re kidnapping powered kids?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Mike said. “El, do you want to show him?”

El gave him a quick look, and then held out her hand. One of Lucas’s *Star Wars* figurines flew into her hand, and she tossed it back to him. Lucas only barely caught it, still looking severely frightened.

He slowly turned to Mike again and said, very seriously, “Mike, do they have Will?”

Mike froze. “What?”

“You heard me, Mike!” Lucas said, his voice rising. “Do they have

Will?"

El looked between them, as Mike struggled to process this. He'd specifically said *superpowered kids*, right? Did... did Lucas know?

"Yes." he finally said. "Yes, El saw him."

Lucas glanced quickly out the window, as if something might be outside. He then took a deep breath and said, "Are you going to try and get him out?"

"Of course." Mike said. "We're not leaving him there. But we need—"

"Then I'm coming with you." Lucas said. "I'm coming with you, and I'm calling Dustin to come join us."

"Lucas, you don't have to—" Mike walked forwards a little, to get closer to his friend.

"Of course I do!" Lucas yelled back at him. "I'm not just going to abandon Will! And neither's Dustin. We've been looking for him *everywhere*, we even..." He trailed off, unlocked his phone again, and then said, "Once we get to Max's place, I'll text Dustin the address. Let me tell my parents that I'm going to be gone for a bit, and then—"

That was when the doorbell rang.

The kids all looked at each other, with Mike and El showing the terror in their eyes. Lucas gave them a quick glance, and then ran out of the room as the downstairs door opened.

"It's probably Max." Mike said, as El stood up. "Don't worry, it's probably Max."

Lucas rushed into the room. "It's not Max."

"*Shit!*"

"I think it's your Lab guys." Lucas said, shutting his door and locking it. "They're in suits, and Erica seems to be pissing them off, so at least she's a good distraction."

“Window.” El said, pointing to said window.

“What?” Mike and Lucas both asked.

“Open.” El’s voice was shaking a little as she spoke, but she seemed to have a plan. “Open the Window.”

“Why?” Lucas asked.

El gave him a look. “We’ll go down.” She moved to the window herself, peering out and down at the ground, looking to see if any of the Bad Men were outside.

“Down the *house*?” Lucas looked panicked at that idea.

“She can float things with her mind.” Mike explained quickly. “She’ll move us down-”

“What happens if there are bad guys out there? What if they shoot at us?”

Mike shut his eyes, clenching his fists and feeling a warmth in his fingers that he recognized but definitely didn’t like. But, if there were people out there... well, he wasn’t about to let them shoot Lucas or El.

“I can protect us.” he finally said. “Just trust me, let’s let El-”

El screamed and jumped back, and the boys turned to her. “What is it?” Lucas asked. “What’s there?”

“Are you okay?” Mike added.

El simply gestured to the window again.

The boys rushed to the window, looking out to see Max had scaled the wall and was hanging onto the window ledge, peering over the edge and giving them a glare. Lucas immediately ran over, lifting the window open and holding out his hand to help her in. “Max, what are you doing?” he asked.

“Well, some assholes were using the door, so I decided the window

was a decent second option.” Max rolled her eyes as she climbed in. “Why the hell did you tell me what was going on?”

“What?” that was something Mike didn’t expect her to say.

“Just tell me to pick you up at Lucas’s, don’t mention El or Nancy!” Max huffed. “Textbook secret government agencies always track phone calls. Are you a fucking moron?”

“I...” Mike glanced between Lucas and El, trying to see if they were as confused as he was.

“They got here pretty fast.” Lucas said a little bit. “Too fast for Mike’s-”

“So they were already driving around town when your call got picked up. God, Wheeler, don’t be a moron.”

“Well, you climbed up the fucking window!” Mike said, rolling his eyes. “Didn’t think that there might be guys with guns or something?”

“I figured the window would be unlocked.”

“How’d you get over here so fast?” Lucas asked. “How close do you live?”

Before anybody could say anything else, they heard shouts from downstairs. Erica wasn’t going to be a good distraction for much longer. “Shit!” Lucas yelled.

“Okay, fine, I have a plan, and you’re going to have to trust me.” Max said, holding out her hands for the other boys. She shut her eyes and took a deep breath, preparing for something, and then said, “I need you to grab hold of me, and whatever you do, do *not* fucking let go.”

“What?” Mike glanced between the other kids, who were just as confused as him. What the hell was she talking about?

“*Grab on, Wheeler, and do not fucking let go!*” Max yelled, and Mike, startled, rushed forwards and grabbed onto her arm. Lucas grabbed her other hand, and after a second, El grabbed onto the same arm as

Mike, standing in front of him, just in case she needed to defend him.

Max shut her eyes, and stared down the door, and then started to walk forwards. And as she did, something changed in Mike. His breath caught in his throat, and it suddenly seemed as if the air was a hundred times thicker. El gasped in front of him, apparently feeling the same thing. His stomach started to ache a little bit, too, and his head felt ever-so-slightly fuzzy.

As Max approached the door, she said, “Lucas, I need you to unlock and open the door. I can’t stop moving.”

“Are you crazy?” Lucas said, his voice a little hoarse as he struggled to speak through whatever the hell was happening to them. “The Bad Guys are out there!”

“Open the fucking door, Lucas!” Max yelled. “Open the *fucking door!*”

Lucas jumped, and after pausing a second, reached forwards to unlock the door. Max walked in place for a second, glancing behind her with a quick, scared look. Mike wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, and he was pretty sure that walking into the hall with a bunch of Bad Men waiting for them downstairs was a bad idea. He used his free hand to grab onto El’s in front of him; her palm was really cold, and Mike was a little worried that she’d pull away, but instead, she squeezed his hand back.

Lucas pushed the door open, and Max led them all outside. They walked down the hall, finally reaching the staircase. Mike took a deep breath, and then glanced down the stairs. He jumped, seeing what looked like five men in suits entering the house, with an angry Erica standing a few feet away, probably about to go get her parents.

And it took Mike a good five seconds to register that none of them were moving.

The others noticed quickly, too: Lucas let out a gasp, and El stiffened a little, barely managing to keep up with Max, who was the only one to not react.

“What the hell?” Mike mumbled.

“Keep going. We’ll sneak out the back.” Max said.

“Why aren’t they moving? What’s wrong with them?” Lucas asked, panic rising in his voice. “What’s wrong with my sister?”

“Nothing’s wrong with them! They’re just slow.”

As they started going down the staircase, Mike felt a cold shock rise in him, as suddenly something fell into place in his mind. He said, very quietly, “Max?”

“What is it, Wheeler?”

Mike tried to collect his thoughts, tried to put his suspicions into words. Finally, he said, “Did you stop time?”

“No, dipshit.” Max rolled her eyes. “They’re not frozen. They’re just moving slower. I think I’ve calculated that we’ve got about two minutes for every second in the rest of the world, at least until I stop moving, and we might have more once we get outside and I can run. If you want to stay moving, keep holding on.”

“We’re just going fast?” Lucas asked, and he met Mike’s eye; yes, they’d both realized the same thing.

“Really fucking fast.” Max nodded.

There was silence for a second, as both boys were too shocked to ask the question that they needed to ask. Thankfully, El beat them to it.

“Powered?” she asked, just loud enough for them to hear.

Max flinched, and Mike wondered if she’d stepped on something as they got off the staircase; but, no, she was just reacting to El’s words. She shuddered, took a deep breath, and said, “Yes. Yes, I’m powered. Now, shut up til we get to the Arcade.”

“The Arcade?” Lucas asked.

“Yes.” Max sighed as they turned the corner, and Lucas moved to push the door open, leading them outside. “It’s where I’ve been hiding out the last two months.”

The boys glanced at each other, fear and surprise still spread across their face.

After another second, Max added, “By the way, once we stop, there’s a very good chance that one to all of you are going to throw up. I’ve got a trash can up there, use it.”

Notes for the Chapter:

As I said yesterday, unfortunately I have to take a mini-hiatus due to a College Visit. I will update again on Saturday. Thank you for reading this so far! I can't wait to get back into things then!

And just so you know, the next chapter has my favorite chapter title of all of them so far. :D

11. Mike is dragged kicking and screaming into the role of "Mom Friend"

Notes for the Chapter:

Heeeeey! I'm back! College visit was alright, but I'm happy to be back to my regular update schedule! Posting a little early today because I got back from the airport and I wanna take a nap. Enjoy!

(Also, again, this is my favorite chapter title)

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mike is dragged kicking and screaming into the role of "Mom Friend"

After Mike had finished puking into the trash can, he looked up, stared Max dead in the eyes, and asked, “What the fuck, Mayfield?”

Max looked up from her beanbag chair. “Oh, you’re welcome. Guess saving your sorry ass was worth it after all.”

Once they’d gotten out the house, Max had broken into a sprint, forcing the others to hold onto her for dear life. She ran right back into the city, past cars that were now only barely moving and making no noise and past crowds of kids who may as well be standing still, and right into the Arcade. From there, she’d kicked a door down and led them up a staircase they’d never seen before, into a large, brightly-lit room that was littered with broken machines. From there, Max finally stopped moving, and the world caught up to them; unfortunately, that had been quite a shock, which did result in severe headaches, difficulty re-adjusting to the new breathability, and, yes, all three of them throwing up into a large garbage can. Max, apparently, was used to this whiplash, because she immediately sped away again, and Mike had only caught sight of a red blur as she disappeared down the stairs to close the door, and then back up to sit down.

And now that Mike wasn't vomiting, he could get a good look at the rest of the room. While it was mostly broken machines, he spotted what looked like a cot in the corner, barely hidden by one broken *Dig Dug*, and covered in blankets and pillows. A mini-fridge was also in another corner, and on top of it, a pile of clothes. He could also see three full backpacks in the shadow of a *Pac-Man* game, though he wasn't sure what they could be filled with.

Mike then turned back to Max, who'd flopped onto a beanbag chair and was now downing a water bottle- when had she grabbed *that*? She looked a little tired, but otherwise fine.

El stood up, then, giving her a curious look. "Sister." she said carefully.

"What?" Max asked, bewildered.

"Sisters. We both have powers." El said.

"Yeah, let's talk about that for a second." Mike said, giving her a dark glare. "When were you going to tell us that you had powers?"

Max considered. "Well... I was kinda leaning towards *Never*, but, hey, you can't have everything."

"Never. You were *never* planning to tell us." Mike repeated, glaring at her. "You'd think this would be *important information*, Max!"

"Do your parents know?" Lucas asked, his voice a little quiet. He had an odd look on his face, too, that Mike wasn't sure how to interpret.

Max glanced between them, and then said, "Uh... so, here's the thing... my parents are kinda... still in California."

"*What?*" Mike yelled so loud that El jumped, staring at him in shock.

"Yo, keep it down! I don't want the employees to know I'm bunking up here!" Max said, jumping up and glancing towards the staircase. "Every time someone comes up, I've gotta hide everything and it's boring as fuck!"

"You ran away from *California*?" Mike was in shock. "How the hell

are you getting food?”

“I can run into the grocery store, steal whatever I want, and get out in less than a minute. I don’t even show up on the cameras if I go into what I’ve dubbed ‘speedmode’.” Max shrugged. “And I know how to hit the vending machines in order to get the right shit out.”

“And you’ve been living on your own? What the fuck, Max, what if you got hurt?”

“What’s it to you? You’re not my Dad. I don’t think you even like me.”

“You *ran away from California to Indiana* and have been living here for two fucking months, Max! Add to that the fact you apparently have superpowers, and I’m gonna be a little fucking concerned about you!”

“I don’t need you to be, I’m fine on my own! Better off, actually.” Max rolled her eyes. “Now I don’t have to deal with my shitty excuse of a stepfamily.”

“What about medicine? What happens if you need medicine?”

“Uh, it’s called googling my symptoms and stealing the vitamins I need.” Max shrugged. “I’m about 80% sure I’m not dying, so...”

“How did you get into school?”

“Hacked their computers so they thought I was a transfer.” Max shrugged. “Gonna be honest, I was just gonna steal schoolbooks and homeschool myself, but I figured if I had friends, I’d be able to have, like, alibis and people who would notice if I went missing and shit. I was just super fucking lucky that you guys didn’t want to meet my parents *and* you don’t treat me like shit.”

“Oh my God!” Mike ran his hands through his hair, staring up at the ceiling. “Oh, my God, you are so fucked. This is fucked. Lucas, don’t you think-”

He stopped talking once he turned to his friend. He had the same strange look on his face, and Mike finally recognized it. Guilt.

“Lucas?”

Lucas glanced between them all- Max, crossing her arms and glaring at Mike, Mike, who was staring in confusion at him, and El, who had moved to the mini fridge and was opening and closing it with fascination. He finally sighed and said, “I... I need to text Dustin. Tell him to come here.”

“No, you’re not.” Max shook her head. “Those creepy government assholes are probably monitoring our texts, too. I’ll fetch him. You guys stay here, I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Not alone!” Mike yelled.

“Well, do you guys *want* to throw up again?” Max asked.

“Do you even know where Dustin lives?”

“I’ll find him.”

“How? Do you have him microchipped?”

Lucas broke up the argument by throwing up his hands and saying, “I’ll go. I’ll go with Max.”

Mike and Max glanced to each other, frustration in their expressions. “If you’re fine with puking again.” Max shrugged.

“Make sure she doesn’t fucking die.” Mike said, before going to over to help El with the fridge.

Lucas turned to Max. “Just... just follow my directions to Dustin’s place. Then we’ll come back here and... I think we have some stuff to talk about.”

Dustin threw his bag onto his bed. He glanced over his shoulder, yelling, “I’ll be in my room if you need me!” to his Mom, before shutting the door.

He’d been out all day, biking down to Castle Byers to look for Will,

and then going to Lucas's place, only to find all roads there blocked off by Police Tape. He was a little concerned about that, and he was planning on calling Lucas once he'd checked in with his Mom back at the apartment. He really hoped that they hadn't been identified, not after their little excursion to the police department the other day to see if *they* had Will.

He turned around, planning to shut the window to block out the huge amount of sunlight that day had produced, only to see both Lucas and Max staring into his room from the other side of the window, sitting on the edge of the windowsill.

"Shit!" he yelled, jumping a little.

After a second, though, he regained his composure and rushed over to the window, opening it. "What's up, Lucas? Why's your house blocked off with police tape?"

"It's *what*?" Lucas asked, panicked. He turned to Max. "Max, my family's still there-"

"They'll be fine, Lucas. The Bad People were looking for El, and unless Erica says something-" Max said quickly.

"She won't, not if she doesn't trust them."

"Sorry, wait, what's going on?" Dustin asked. "Who's El?"

The two glanced at Dustin, and then Lucas said, "Hawkins Lab is kidnapping powered kids. They've got Will."

Dustin froze. *No. No, that couldn't be right.*

"We've gotta go to the arcade, I'll explain the rest on the way." Lucas said.

Dustin hesitated, glancing towards his door again. His Mom would be worried as shit, but... well, maybe she'd just assume he went to find Will again. He'd bring his phone if she needed anything.

"Okay." Dustin nodded.

“Grab onto Max’s arm.” Lucas said.

Max had a surprised look on her face, probably due to how quickly Lucas had explained things to him and how fast Dustin had accepted it. Dustin simply grabbed his bag again, throwing it over his shoulder and gripping onto Max’s arm.

“Okay, okay, then.” Max shrugged off her confusion. “Let’s go.”

“You think somebody died?” Kali asked.

Will had managed to sneak back to her room- she’d referred to it as *Solitary*- and he was still sitting inside the vents, staring down into her cell. He was still shaking. “Y-yeah. From what they said, it sounds like two kids broke in and one of them got shot... I... I’m scared it’s my friends.”

“I’m sure it’s not. If they caused as much trouble with you as you say they have, I feel like the Lab would be a lot more explicit if one of *them* was the one who was dead. Or they’d try harder to kidnap them, like they did to you. They’ve killed powered kids before, but if they think they can drag them in for experiments, they will.”

“Kal...” Will asked warily, glancing down the vents and away from her. He didn’t really want to ask- didn’t want to hear the answer- but he *had* to know. If he wanted to know what they wanted from him and his friends, he had to ask. “Kal, what were they going to do to me?”

Kali was silent for a long while, and that didn’t make Will feel *any* better. Finally, she said, “Probably what they’ve done to me and my siblings.” She took a deep breath, and then continued. “They’d start by breaking you. Probably throw you into solitary like me, starve you until you’re too weak to fight back. Then they’d start the testing- making you get to the limits of your powers, measuring your brainwaves, trying to figure out how best to weaponize you. And if you tried to fight back, you go back to solitary, or you get electrocuted, or drugged, or...”

Her voice broke, but Will couldn't comfort her at the moment. His stomach had dropped to the floor, and his breath had caught in his throat. He could barely function, just *thinking* about what they had planned for him, just because of what he could do, and the fact that they'd already done it to Kali and to her siblings. He felt so bad for those kids, especially since, from the way Kali talked, not all of them were around anymore. Some of them would never be free.

By the time he'd steadied himself enough to breathe, he realized that Kali had been silent for a bit too long. Wait, no, he *count* hear her faint breathing, although it was a bit ragged... was she crying?

"Kali?" he called.

"Wh-what?"

"This is some bullshit."

He didn't know what made him say it like that, but he was glad he did, because he heard a small laugh from inside the cell. It was probably through her tears, but it was something.

"You're right, Will." Kali said. "It's all bullshit."

12. Nobody thought to tell Mike anything

CHAPTER TWELVE

Nobody thought to tell Mike anything

Dustin got back and, surprisingly, did not throw up.

“No, I mean, my stomach hurts like hell.” Dustin said, after Mike expressed his incredulity, “But I don’t need to puke quite yet.”

“Lucky.” Lucas said; he had once again vomited into the trash can, and Max had brought him a bag of chips from the vending machine.

“You’re gonna need some more food, you just threw up quite a bit.” Max shrugged.

Lucas muttered some kind of “thank you” as he opened the bag, and Dustin turned to Mike and El, both of whom were sitting on the beanbag together.

“So, this is El?” Dustin asked, eyes wide.

“Uh, yeah.” Mike felt a little uncomfortable, but he noticed that El didn’t seem to be as bothered; in fact, she looked just as fascinated by Dustin as he was by her.

“You can make things float?”

El nodded, holding out her hand, and Dustin’s hat flew into her hand.

“Sick!” Dustin cheered, as El threw the hat back to him. “And Max can run fast!”

“That’s one way of putting it.” Max leaned against the wall, trying to look relaxed.

“Uh, speaking of which,” Lucas said, glancing at Dustin.

“Yeah, did you... wanna talk to us about something?” Mike asked. Lucas still had that guilty look on his face, which Dustin was starting to match.

“Uh, yeah. It’s about... it’s about Will, having powers...” Lucas said, glancing towards the ground.

“Did you know?” Mike asked accusatory.

Lucas and Dustin gave each other a look again, and then Dustin said, “On three?”

“One.” Lucas responded.

“Wait, what’s going on?” Mike asked.

“Two.” Dustin said.

“Are you guys-” Max perked up a little, interested.

“Three!” Lucas yelled.

The boys both threw their arms out, and Mike and El leapt to their feet as stuff burst from their hands. It took Mike a second to process what was happening; Dustin had small bolts of electricity bursting from his fingers, while Lucas had swirls of red beams surrounding his hands. The boys then clenched their fists, the energies still trying to break out.

“Holy shit!” Max screeched.

And at that moment, things got crazier.

Because then the different energies- the lightning and the beams- surrounded their hands, and then shot up their arms, engulfing them. In only a few seconds, before Mike could even figure out what was happening, both were in some kind of new costume.

Wait.

Mike recognized those outfits.

Lucas's suit was in shades of red and off-white, while Dustin's was a dark blue with flecks of gold. Both had similar masks over their faces, but this time, they didn't hide anything.

Of course. Of course it was them. Why didn't he see it before?

"What the *fuck*?" Max yelled.

The boys turned to them, and Lucas smiled awkwardly. "So, uh, yeah." Lucas said. "Uh, we figured out this transformation shit about a year ago. Dustin did it first, really."

"It's just the concentrated energy of the powers overloading and changing our—" Dustin began.

"How the *fuck* did we not recognize you before?" Mike asked.

El tapped his shoulder, and he turned around. She asked quickly, "What's this?"

"They're... they're vigilantes?" Mike said, glancing back to the other boys. "And they didn't *think to tell us!* Guys, seriously, how didn't we know it was you? Your faces are barely covered!"

"Ooh, that's really fascinating, too!" Dustin said quickly, his face lighting up. "See, the excess energy from the transformation—" Lucas shot him a glare, and he quickly said, "Well, long story short, it works as a perfect disguise mechanism. We've only found two things that bypass it- if you see us transform, or if the mask is removed. There might be more- we've been meaning to test out just telling people ourselves, if we can find someone safe enough- but we've got no real idea the extent of—"

"I feel like an idiot." Max muttered, staring ahead. "How the hell couldn't I figure out it was you?"

"It's part of the magic shit that gives us powers." Lucas shrugged. "Which is really good, because if we were easily recognized, we'd all have gotten kidnapped a lot fucking sooner, especially since we broke into police files yesterday to see if they'd kidnapped Will. Guess they didn't."

"So, is... is Will the third one?" Max asked. "The one with the color magic?"

The boys glanced to each other again, and then Lucas said, "Y-yeah."

Mike thought this over for a minute; yeah, it did make *sense*, he figured, seeing as he had been fighting with Lucas and Dustin and clearly had the same powers, but something in his head just... kept that information blocked off. It seemed strange, as if the conclusion was wrong even though it was definitely right.

Lucas apparently noticed Mike's confusion, and said, "Don't worry, that'll still be the transformation energy clouding your head. Hopefully it'll go away soon, but, like, again, we have no idea. We've only really been doing this stuff for a year or so—"

"A *year*?" Mike asked, horrified. "You've been running around and beating up criminals for a *fucking year*?"

"More like... eleven months and three days." Dustin said, glancing up at the ceiling as he counted in his head. "It started with the guy pointing a gun at Will, and—"

"A guy did *what*?"

"Don't worry, me and Lucas beat him up—"

"Lucas and I." Lucas correct.

Dustin glared at him. "Seriously? That's what's important right now?"

"No, no, it's not." Mike shook his head. "What's important is that you guys have been running around playing superheros for a *goddamn year*, and you didn't tell us *shit!*"

"Well, we've only been friends with Max for... less than two months?" Lucas shrugged.

"And you've known *me* since *fucking Kindergarten!*" Mike shouted.

"Well, how long have you been keeping her?" Lucas finally said, gesturing to El, who was staring between the other two with some

sort of confusion, and she jumped when she realized that he was referring to her. “And you’ve only told the girl you hate?”

“First of all, I didn’t *tell* Max, she broke into my house and El threw her into a wall.” Mike said.

“Eh, that’s fair.” Max shrugged.

“And second, we’re not talking about *my* secrets, we’re talking about *yours!*”

“Since when do you have secrets?” Dustin asked incredulously.
“You’re like, the most open person on the planet.”

Mike tried to retort, but his breath caught in his throat.

Since when do you have secrets?

“Stop.” they all jumped, turning around to see that El had spoken. She glanced between them all, and then said, “Don’t fight.”

They looked at her for a second, and then Max said, “El is right. We need to focus on getting Will out of Hawkins Lab.”

“We... Max and I did have a plan.” Mike said. “I... I’ve been staking out the Lab for a while- don’t ask- and their cameras are faulty under storms. Dustin, there’s a huge storm tomorrow, if... if you can summon some electricity to black out the cameras for a bit, they probably won’t notice and will chalk it up to the thunder, and Max can get in and out in- *wait a minute!*”

He turned to Max, a shocked expression on his face. “When you said you could get in and out of there faster than me-”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I fucking meant.” Max rolled her eyes.

“Did you... did you think I wouldn’t see you running in and out of there in five seconds?”

“I was kinda hoping you’d be too dumb to notice.” she shrugged.

“I can probably override their cameras.” Dustin said quickly, before

Mike could fight with her some more. “You’d think that electrical powers would be a pain with computers, but it turns out I’m actually really good at re-directing their energy now.”

“One time we turned him into a human Google.” Lucas said. “It was pretty wild.”

“Okay, I don’t really know what that means, but okay.” Mike said. “We can disrupt the cameras, have Max get Will and El’s sister out—”

“Eight.” El said quickly.

“Uh, I have a question?” Max raised her hand. “Once we get them out, what’ll we do with them? If we bring Will back to his house, the government guys could grab him off the street again. And where the hell is El’s sister supposed to go?”

“El’s sister has friends.” Mike said, but Max made a decent point.

Lucas paused. “I think we might have a place.”

“You do?” Mike asked.

Lucas turned to Max. “Think you can run us all somewhere again?”

“I can go into speedmode all day.” Max shrugged. “I only start to seriously lose energy if I’m in it for over an hour my-time. How far away are we going, and how much stuff do I have to pack?”

“It’s just in the woods, and... actually, it might be safer for you to live there than in the top of the Arcade.” Lucas said. “But we’d have to ask Will first.”

Max considered. “Kay. Lemme grab some more food from the fridge, and then we’ll go- where are we going?”

“Castle Byers.”

13. Dustin throws Everyone down a Trap-Floor

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dustin throws Everyone down a Trap-Floor

“You... you can stay here for a bit.” Jonathan offered as he helped Nancy through the window. “If that’s okay. Maybe later we can try to sneak into your house or something, get you bus money...”

The two of them had just climbed into Jonathan’s room. He felt a little self-conscious taking Nancy here, especially since he hadn’t cleaned up recently, but he didn’t know where else they could go. It wasn’t as if his room was a *mess*, like most teenage boys’ rooms were expected to be, not in the traditional way. But he did have a bunch of photos on the floor and hanging on the walls, taking up a good amount of space.

“I don’t want to leave. Not yet.” Nancy glanced around the room, her eyes falling on the unique mess. “You’re... a photographer?”

“Y-yeah. I’ve got an interest in old cameras and stuff.” Jonathan shrugged. “But, like, if that government place is going after you, you’d probably want to go somewhere far away.”

“No.” Nancy shook her head. “Those bastards... they *killed* Barb. I can’t just let them get away with that... and I don’t just want to *run* from them.”

“Nancy, do you think they’re going to let two High Schoolers destroy a government lab?” Jonathan asked.

“I’m not just gonna-”

“We need to have a *plan*.”

Nancy stopped. “Sorry, what?”

“A plan, Nancy. We can’t just waltz in there, guns blazing. Best Case

Scenario, it's destroyed but we're labelled as criminals. Worst Case, we both end up dead. If we want to take that Lab down, we need to be smart about it."

"You're... you're going to help me?" she seemed genuinely surprised.

"Yeah. Yeah, of course."

"Why?"

"First of all, because I'm not an asshole. I don't want them running around and getting away with killing people. And, Second..." Jonathan paused, taking a deep breath. Did he really want to tell her? "I..." Well, he couldn't avoid this for long. "I think they might have my Brother."

Nancy stared at him for a second. "Why would they have your brother?"

Jonathan took a deep breath, and then picked up a photo from the floor- a photo of a pencil on his desk. He showed her the picture, and then held it flat in his palm.

Within a second, gray smoke surrounded the photo, and once it dissipated, a gray pencil was there instead.

Nancy stared at his hand in shock, and then slowly looked up at him.

Jonathan bit his lip, and then said, "Will, too. That's... that's why they took him."

Nancy stared for another minute, and then said, "Well... fuck."

"Here we are." Lucas said, and Max stopped running.

The world caught back up with them, and Mike and El rushed off to throw up into a bush. Dustin was still mostly fine, while Lucas apparently had developed some kind of tolerance after running with Max three times in a row. That, of course, didn't mean he got off scott-free: he still had a heavy stomach ache, and almost doubled

over once time came rushing back at them.

“Where is this?” Max asked, staring up at the building; it was a small shed, not any bigger than a Target single-stall Bathroom. Above it, a sign hung, reading *All Friends Welcome*.

“C-Castle Byers.” Lucas said.

“Why did we come here?” Mike asked, standing up and grabbing a branch to gain balance. “This is just Will’s old hideout. We haven’t used this in forever.”

“Um... why don’t you guys come inside?” Dustin said, moving forwards to open the door. “We’ll explain in here.”

“I don’t see how this is better than the Arcade.” Max said, as Lucas passed her and she followed behind him. “It’s a lot smaller, and there’s probably spiders and shit.”

“You’ll see.” Lucas assured her.

Mike glanced to El, who had just stopped holding her wig back, letting the blonde hair fall over her shoulders. “Uh... let’s go in?” he said, holding out his hand in case she wanted it. She looked at him confusedly, but eventually reached and grabbed his hand, walking forwards into the shed. Mike blushed and followed.

They all crowded into the Shed, glancing around at the dark walls. “Wow. It looks like something I’d see on reruns of *Little House on the Prairie*.” Max said. “It’s actually kinda... nice.”

“Huh, I didn’t think you’d like something like *Little House*.” Lucas said, as Dustin moved towards the far wall.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me.” Max shrugged.

“Apparently.”

Dustin leaned against the wall, waiting for a second. Then, he reached out and knocked on the wall with his fist, in a certain pattern.

• - • - - • - - • - • - -

And after a second, the floor gave way.

Mike screamed as they plummeted, and screamed more when he suddenly stopped. He hadn't hit a floor, no; he was just stopped mid-fall. He breathed deeply for a second, still hearing assorted screams, and he turned to see El slightly above him, shutting her eyes and holding one hand towards him. Both of them were floating, while the other three had continued to drop.

"What the *hell* just happened?" Mike asked.

El shook her head, glancing down the dark hole; they could barely see anything except each other, and definitely couldn't see a bottom.

After a second, they heard Dustin's voice. "Come on, guys! Hurry it up! We've got shit to do!"

"Okay, so at least one of them's alive." Mike muttered. He glanced back up at El, and said, "I guess we've gotta fall."

El nodded, and Mike felt himself start to slowly descend- El was still holding a little onto him. She also lowered herself a little faster in order to end up next to him, grabbing quickly onto his arm.

After about a minute, they finally spotted a light, and descended a little quicker. Underneath them was a something that seemed to be a large mattress, and Mike said, "You can probably let us drop, now." He didn't want her to lose too much energy with her powers.

Of course, once they dropped, Mike landed flat on his back, bouncing a little. El landed next to him, sitting up almost instantly. He let out a groan, saying, "What the *fuck*, Dustin! A little warning would've been nice!"

And then he sat up, and he completely froze over.

In front of him was a room that was bigger than any room he'd ever seen. He'd landed right in the middle, and he turned around quite a few times to take in all of it. The walls and floor were light purple colors, spattered with reflections from the lights from the ceiling.

Across one entire wall was what looked like a pale blue supercomputer, a large keyboard spread in front of it, with two rolling chairs pushed against it. On another wall was a bookshelf, stacking what looked like hundreds of old, thick books. The third wall housed shelves with a variety of weapons scattered across in no particular order, from long swords to heavy guns to weird electric cables. The fourth wall was made of glass, and it looked like there was an entire room behind there, colored in yellow and with what looked like scorch marks on the wall.

“Well?” Dustin asked, smiling brightly. “What do you think?”

Mike turned to him, shock written across his face. Max, who was standing next to Dustin, had a similar look, while Lucas just looked a little smug. Mike glanced over to El, to see that she was just as amazed as them.

“Pretty.” El finally said.

“Wow.” Mike added.

“What the hell?” Max said. “Did you guys *build* this shit?”

“I *wish*.” Dustin said.

“Will found this when he fell through a floorboard. We just figured out how to set up the floor to flip.” Lucas explained. “No idea how this got here, we think whoever owned the shed before the Byers must’ve put it in. I’m honestly surprised that the computer still works.”

“Well, I updated it.” Dustin shrugged. “Just a little, though.”

“And we added a couple of books.” Lucas interjected. “Most of the ones here were super old, and were about science shit.”

“Oh, but there was one copy of *Little Women*. ”

“And, for some reason, a VHS of *Heathers*. The original one, obviously, we’re not heathens.”

“And the entire *Wrinkle in Time* series.”

“And a lot of *Nancy Drew* books from the ‘30s.”

“Oh! And there was the History of some town in Maine, but that was kinda hard to read.”

“And what we think might be some kinda Necronomicon but we haven’t been able to translate it.”

“We haven’t touched the weapons much, we kinda have our own built into our genes.” Dustin shrugged. “Oh! And we added that fridge over there.” he gestured towards a fridge, placed in the corner between the glass of the practice room and the bookshelves. “And there’s a door to the bathroom hidden in the practice room, we can show you where it is. To get in, you just tap on the glass three times and a door opens up for you.”

“We use the practice room a lot.”

“We think we’ve categorized all of Will’s powers from colors just by throwing things at him over there.” Lucas said. “We’ve got the list somewhere...”

“I used it as a bookmark in *Swiftly Tilting Planet*.”

“A bookmark?”

“Where else was I supposed to put it?”

“There’re drawers on the keyboard, Dustin!”

“So,” Max interrupted, staring towards the weapons with a fascination sparking in her eyes, “This is your HQ?”

“Yep. Welcome to Castle Byers.” Lucas grinned, holding his arms out. “It’s pretty big, as you can see, you could probably move everything you own here. Hell, El can stay here, too. And Will!”

“And you, too, Mike.” Dustin added. “If those government guys are still looking for you.”

Shit. They probably are.

“Speaking of which,” Lucas said, “I’m going upstairs to call my parents, see if anything’s wrong. If those assholes did anything to them...” he trailed off, glaring down at his hands. He sighed, and then pushed his hands together again, letting energy flow into his hands. In a flash, his suit was gone, and he looked normal again. He yawned, reached into his pocket, pulling out his phone, and he added, “Do you guys want me to call anyone?”

“Uh, tell Mom I’m sleeping over at your place.” Dustin said. “We can have, like, a group sleepover here.”

“Can you try and call Nancy?” Mike asked, the thought coming to him suddenly. “I’ll give you my phone, she probably won’t answer if it’s an unknown number. I wanna make sure she’s okay.”

“I’ll go up with you.” Max added. “I can run to the store and get some stuff. Like toothbrushes, sleeping bags, bandaids...”

“And when you get back, maybe we can try and help you with your powers.” Lucas suggested. “Try and help you transform. We can help El, too, if you’re okay with that.”

El nodded, and then she glanced to Mike, looking a little confused. Mike turned to her, asking, “Do you need anything? Any questions?”

She paused, glancing between all of them, before asking, “Can we still have Eggos?”

Steve was sitting on his bed, staring at the ceiling and thinking very hard about his life choices when his phone rang.

Nancy hadn’t returned his call and that was fine, she had a life, but he couldn’t help feeling a little worried. His parents were out of town, meaning that he was alone, and his friends were busy, and he had nothing to do but think about College in a few years and how he’d probably never do anything meaningful and would die alone.

You know, normal teenage thoughts.

His phone did start ringing, though, and he picked it up, hoping it

was Nancy. It wasn't- he saw *Unknown Caller* on his screen. He paused, wondering if maybe it was a prank call but... well, might as well answer it. He had nothing better to do.

"Hello?" he said, flipping it to speaker phone so that he could put the phone down and go grab something- maybe his homework, he still had crap to do.

"Hello, Steve?" Steve stopped. That was Nancy's Mom's voice. Why was Karen Wheeler calling him? "Is this the right number? One of Nancy's friends said"

"Hi, Ms. Wheeler." he said, trying to make himself sound as polite as possible. "I was just doing homework- *like a good kid*- "Do you need anything?"

"Steve, is Nancy with you?"

Shit, she sounded worried. He hesitated, and then said, "I haven't heard from her all day. I assumed she was with you, is something wrong with her?"

"Steve, she's missing. I thought she might be over with you. There's these... these people, they say she's in trouble, that she and Mike saw something they shouldn't have... you haven't seen Mike either?"

Steve dropped his schoolbag to the floor. *Fuck homework.* "No, I'm sorry. Do you know where she might be? I'll go look for her-"

"Thank you, Steve. I can't leave the house, me and Holly are under quarantine, and Ted'll be when he gets home. I'm calling the Hollands next, and then all of Mike's friends' parents- you don't happen to know the Mayfields, do you?"

"Afraid not." Steve grabbed his phone, leaving his room to grab his coat. "What... what sort of trouble is Nancy in? Did they say?"

"I don't know, they're from the government, I think? And they just said that Mike and Nancy saw something bad, they won't tell us anything else..."

Steve was almost out the door when he realized something. He

stopped for a second, and then said, “I’m going to head out. I’ll call you if I hear anything, Ms. Wheeler. Let me know if you find her first.”

“Thank you, Steve.”

Steve hung up, and then walked out the door. He was going to head to his car and drive into town- she might be there. But she wouldn’t be in plain sight, not if she was on the run from somebody.

Nancy and Mike saw something they shouldn’t.

He didn’t know about Ms. Wheeler, but he definitely didn’t trust anybody who would be trying to track down a girl and her preteen brother just for “seeing something”, unless that something was really bad.

And if these government people were hunting them just for seeing shit...

Well, he’d have to hope he could find Nancy or Mike before anybody else.

14. Max tests her powers and gives Mike anxiety™

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Max tests her powers and gives Mike anxiety ™

“Heads up, Wheeler!”

Mike jumped away from the mattress as Max landed with a thump. In a second, she rolled away and rushed to another wall, which was good, as she was followed by five very large things that looked like rolled-up blankets.

“What are *those*?” Dustin asked, shocked.

“Sleeping bags. If we’re going to be spending the night, we’re not sleeping in a fucking pile.” Max shrugged. “I got some extra stuff in my bag, too. Lucas’ll be down in a sec, he’s still trying to call Nancy.”

Mike felt a panic rise in his chest. “So, she’s not okay?”

“Or she’s figured out that the government is listening to our calls.” Max said. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine. Worry about us right now.”

Mike nodded a little, placing the book back on the shelf. He’d been reading some of the boys’ science books to El while they waited. Dustin had busied himself with something on the supercomputer, which shined pretty brightly and seemed to be mostly in code. El had braided part of the hair from her wig while she’d been listening, but now she was eyeing the sleeping bags suspiciously.

Max rolled the sleeping bags into a pile against the bookshelf, and after a second, Lucas landed on the mattress. He bounced up quite quickly, and said, “Okay, so Dustin, your Mom says you’re okay to sleep over, I couldn’t reach Nancy- sorry- and I talked to my Mom. I obviously didn’t say much, but my Mom told me that they’re all fine, and she didn’t use any codes so we can believe her. I let her know that I was with friends and not to worry.”

“Codes?” El asked.

“Words that convey secret messages.” Lucas defined.

“Why do you and your Mom have codes?” Mike asked.

“Our whole family does.” Lucas said. He hesitated before elaborating. “Uh, my Dad has Impeccable Accuracy, which was really helpful while he was in the army, my Mom’s got limited Telepathy, which makes hiding things from her pretty difficult, but she gives us privacy almost all the time. We’re still not entirely sure the limits of Erica’s powers, but she’s... definitely got some, I’ll tell you that.”

“Do they know you’re running around like a vigilante?” Mike asked, still a little bitter.

“Oh, hell no! There’s no way they’d let me get away with that shit.” Lucas shook his head. “Don’t think they’ll find out, either. They don’t watch the news much, and if they see me, the transformation magic’ll probably still work.”

“So, your powers are genetic?” Max asked.

“Aren’t yours?” Lucas asked back.

Max shook her head, but didn’t say anything else.

“We *think* mine are.” Dustin finally said, after pressing a couple buttons and shutting the supercomputer off for a second. “Not sure. By the time I figured out what I could do, my Dad wasn’t, well, around, but he might’ve had powers- my Mom doesn’t, I don’t think. We’re not sure about Will, either.”

“Do you know where your powers came from?” Lucas asked El.

El paused, glancing down at the floor, and then she said, “Born.”

“You were born with them?” Mike asked.

El nodded. “Papa said.”

Her voice broke a little as she said that, so Mike quickly changed the

subject. “What do you guys know about the superpowers? Like, how do they work?”

“Well, if you want to listen to the six-hour lecture Dustin prepared, feel free.” Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Ha-ha.” Dustin huffed. “It’s actually seven hours, thank you, but yeah, the short of it is, however it happens, it hooks onto our genes. We couldn’t change it any more than we could change our eye color.”

Mike bit his lip. “So... it’s irreversible?”

They all stared at him for a good, long while. Finally, Lucas said. “No. And we wouldn’t want to get rid of it. It’s part of us.”

“Why would you ask that?” Max shot him a dark glare.

“It’s... it’s nothing. Just a hypothetical.” Mike stared at the ground, avoiding looking at his friends directly. “If we’re gonna be spending the night here, and finding Will tomorrow, I want to spend as much time as we can catching up on this superpower stuff.”

“Speaking of which,” Dustin turned to Max, “How would you like a cool-ass costume?”

“You’re gonna show me how to do that?” Max’s eyes widened with delight.

“Sure. We had to teach Will, and now we get to teach you.” Lucas grinned. “First off, you’ve gotta get into the practice room. The door is-”

Max rushed off, and in about two seconds, she was behind the glass. “Show me what to do!” she yelled.

The others glanced at each other, and then Dustin and Lucas rushed to the glass, standing just on the other side. Mike glanced to El, and then they ran to catch up, stopping just behind the others.

“We’re having you in here in case something goes wrong.” Lucas explained. “I almost blew up the bookshelf when we tried in here.”

“Solid thinking.” Max nodded. “What do I do?”

“You’re going to need a lot of energy in a small space; we use the clasping-hands method mainly, but that’s probably not the only way.” Dustin explained.

“Lots of energy, got it.”

Mike suddenly felt a sense of dread rise in his chest, and he quickly said, “She should get away from the glass!”

They all turned to stare at him in bewilderment, and it took him a second to calm down enough to explain. “She... if there’s a lot of energy, she could break the... the glass.”

While the girls still looked a little confused, Lucas and Dustin both seemed to understand, looking at him with a look akin to pity- a look that Mike didn’t like, but wasn’t ready to challenge at the moment. “Just back up a bit, Max.” Lucas said.

“Fine, if you say so.” Max said, retreating two or three feet. “Now, lots of energy... I kinda spend all my energy in running, but that’s not a small space, that controls my entire body.”

“Have you ever tried just speeding up part of you?” Dustin asked.

“Well, I’d rather not go so fast part of my body flies off.”

“Is that what would happen?” Lucas looked concerned at this.

“I haven’t tried it, but it *could*.” Max took a second and then held out her hands. She stayed still for a second, and then she said, “How do I start?”

Mike bit back a groan, while Lucas said, “Just... try to make your hands go fast.”

“What am I supposed to do with them?”

El tapped on the glass for a second, drawing everyone’s attention. She paused for a second, and then flapped her hands up and down. When she stopped, she turned back to Max, who repeated the gesture. El

nodded, and Max took a deep breath.

“I lose my hands,” she said, “Y’all are dead, got it?”

Lucas and Dustin nodded, while El simply gave her a look. Mike, meanwhile, stepped backwards a little, putting more distance between himself and the glass.

Max started flapping her hands, at first at a normal speed. Slowly, her hands started to move up and down faster and faster, until they were nothing but a blur. Max winced a little, taking deep breaths, and after a minute, she said, “I think I feel something!”

“*Something?*” Lucas asked.

“Like... like some kind of heat, going up my arms.” Max said. “If that make sense? And my hands are almost... sparkling?”

“That’s good! That’s pretty good!” Dustin said. “That’s how it feels! Now, try to bring them into an enclosed space.”

“Enclosed space?”

“Like, clasp your hands together?”

“Um, I can *try*, but my hands are going pretty fast, so no promises.” Max said. She took a deep breath, and then threw her hands together, in more of a clap than a clasp.

The second her hands touched, an energy shot up her arms, surrounding her. Within a second, she’d transformed.

Everyone screamed and jumped back. Max let out a screech, staring down at her new outfit. It colored with a mix of dark blues and reds swirling around each other. Covering her forearm were matching gloves, and she also had new thick boots. Her hair had been pulled back into a twisted ponytail, and she had a small mask that covered the space around her eyes.

“Holy shit!” Max yelled, her surprise turning to glee. “This is awesome!”

“Wow, you got that down *fast*.” Lucas said. “Dustin did it on accident, and it took Will and I a couple tries-”

Max, clearly not listening, immediately sped around the room, becoming a barely visible blur of blue and red. She finally skidded to a stop in the middle, saying breathlessly, “I think I went faster! How’d I go faster?”

“Once you’ve transformed, you expend less energy while using your powers.” Lucas said. “What might’ve knocked you out before would be just a slight inconvenience.”

“That’s *fucking cool!*” Max yelled, and then she started speeding around again, almost literally bouncing off the walls. Dustin turned to El, saying, “You wanna give it a try?”

El considered, then shook her head.

Suddenly, Max, in another burst of speed, ran into the wall.

She bounced off, landing on the ground. She laughed it off with, “I’ve gotta watch where I’m going, apparently,” and started moving again.

She didn’t notice Mike’s face pale the second she made contact with the glass. He jumped back, throwing his arms over his head. El noticed first, turning around at his sudden movements and staring at him in confusion, stepping forwards slightly. Lucas and Dustin turned to look, and then immediately ran over to him.

“You okay?” Lucas asked quickly.

Instantly embarrassed, Mike nodded. “It’s nothing. Just thought she was gonna break the glass and kill us all with glass shards, you know.”

“We haven’t broken the glass yet, we don’t think it’s possible.” Dustin assured him. “And I’ve hit it with lightning.”

“I hit it with a cannonball of energy.” Lucas added. “And Will’s hit it with pretty much every force known to humankind.”

Mike nodded numbly. “I think I’m gonna... I’m gonna go through the

books again. You guys have fun.”

He walked away, trying not to look behind him at the large, glass wall. So he didn’t realize El was running towards him until she reached forwards to grab onto his arm. Mike froze at that, turning slightly to look at her. She gave him a weak smile, which he returned, and they moved back to the bookshelf as Lucas and Dustin started talking with Max again.

“Alright, I have one more call to make.” Nancy said, as Jonathan shoved his photos into a folder. “I think he can help us.”

“He?”

“My boyfriend. Steve Harrington?”

Jonathan nodded stiffly. He knew who he was, he was one of the popular kids in school. He hadn’t talked to him personally, but he knew his friend group, and they weren’t exactly the nicest people.

“Anyway, his Dad had some guy come into his office the other day rambling about conspiracies and shit, and Steve swiped the business card. If Steve can come pick us up, we can go see him. If he wants to hear about government conspiracies... well, I’ve got a great one for him.”

“You think that’ll be safe?” Jonathan asked carefully.

“At this point, I don’t care.” Nancy shook her head. “I watched my best friend die today, and I want those bastards who killed her to suffer as soon as possible.”

She tapped a number into her phone, and gave Jonathan a pointed look before putting it to her ear. She listened for a bit, and then said, “Steve? Hey. Hey- no, no, I’m okay. What are you...” her face paled. “My Mom said... missing? B-both of us? Mike’s not with me... I’m okay, really. Listen... some shit happened, and I need you to get me to that Conspiracy Nut. Can you pick me up...” she paused, listening to him say something. Finally, she said, “In that case, pick me up at the spot we had our first kiss? Okay, I swear, I’ll tell you everything

there. Pack some shit for however long we'll be gone... thanks, I'll see you there..."

She hung up, and looked to Jonathan. "My brother's missing. You don't think..."

"That they got him, too?" Jonathan asked. "It's possible, I guess, if Will wasn't... if he was captured, Mike might've been, too."

Nancy took a deep breath, and then said, "Let's go. We've got to sneak out of here fast."

"Um, let me... let me give an excuse to my Mom." Jonathan said. "She'll be worried sick if I don't tell her something, especially with Will already gone."

"Alright." Nancy said. "And then we'll start taking down the Lab."

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: a shitton of backstory and a Superhero Slumber Party

15. Everyone dumps their Life Stories on Unsuspecting Friends

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Everyone dumps their Life Stories on Unsuspecting Friends

“So,” Max said, playing with the hair that had fallen over her shoulder, “What exactly *are* your powers?”

They’d all set up the sleeping bags in the middle of the floor, right in front of the fridge; it was cold, but they didn’t really feel like sleeping under a wall of weapons, and this was as far as they could get without sleeping in the practice room which, Max informed Mike and El, was even colder.

“Energy Beams and Electricity.” Lucas shrugged. “You know that.”

“I know, but, like, what are the specifics?” Max asked.

“Well...” Lucas considered, and then held out his hand, letting red beams of energy run over his fingers. Everyone stared at it as he talked. “I can summon the... from around us... it’s kinda hard to explain, but I basically summon pure energy from the air. I can shape it into whatever I want, but usually in combat I tend to just throw a lot of it at people, it usually does the trick. But I *can* do cool shit like this.”

As they watched the energy, it lifted into the air, forming itself into the shape of a flower. After a second, he drifted it towards Max, letting it drop towards her. It landed on her lap, and Max gasped at the fact it was suddenly solid. She picked it up, feeling it over in her hands. “It’s warm.” she said quietly.

“Well, yeah, *energy*.” Lucas said, smiling a little. “I can make it more and less solid at will. It’s easier to fight with light beams, but making things is pretty cool, too.”

He turned to Dustin, who, after a second, shrugged and said, “I can summon electricity from my hands. It’s pretty sick.”

“And?” Mike asked.

Dustin considered. “My normal lightning isn’t as powerful as real lightning- it only kinda stings unless I focus *really* hard, which is difficult to do in a fight. I can summon real lightning from stormclouds- which can be pretty deadly, honestly. Can’t summon the clouds themselves, though, so my normal lightning is easier to use. And, yeah, apparently it makes me better at computers, although I occasionally risk shocking them.”

“How’d you...” Max hesitated, before tossing the flower back to Lucas. “How’d you discover your powers?”

“I was outside during a storm and channeled the lightning by accident.” Dustin said. “It was actually pretty cool, but I was super freaked out.”

“I was fighting with Erica when I was... seven?” Lucas said. “And accidentally hit her with an energy blast. We both started screaming, and our parents sat us down and explained the whole ‘superpowers’ thing to us.”

“And he picked his name then, because every vigilante needs a name picked by a seven-year-old.” Dustin added.

“Picked your name?” Max glanced between the boys, suddenly confused.

“Well, we’ve got vigilante names.” Lucas hesitantly said, suddenly looking very embarrassed.

“Oh my Gosh.” Max let out a little laugh, glancing up at the ceiling. “Of course you nerds would give yourselves superhero names. Come on, what are they?”

Dustin shrugged. “I picked ‘Cyclone’, cause those’re kinda like tornadoes and are sometimes preceded by storms.”

“Tornado?” El asked, confused, as Max buried her head in her hands.

“It’s like a bunch of wind all collected together and spinning.” Dustin explained to her carefully. “It’s super dangerous, rips up parts of land and throws things into the air.”

“Oh.”

“And Lucas picked ‘Dragonfire’, because-”

“Because it sounded *cool*.” Lucas rolled his eyes. “I was *seven*, Dustin.”

“I mean, Dragons are pretty sweet.” Max shrugged.

“Will picked ‘Wisdom’, and honestly, we’ve got no clue why.” Dustin added. “We can probably ask him once... once he gets back.”

“How did...” Mike hesitated, glancing towards El, before asking, “How did Will get his?”

“He didn’t tell us.” Lucas said. “But I found out he had powers first, when we were walking home and something almost fell on us. I deflected it with my energy, and I was so scared he’d freak, but he just showed me absorbed the color from a red flower pot and set something on fire. Even Stevens.”

“And I came to them when I found my powers.” Dustin said.

“And none of you told me?” Mike asked, his voice suddenly very quiet.

If he was being honest with himself, he could understand why they didn’t tell him about their situation. Being powered wasn’t exactly looked lightly upon, and it wasn’t as if his parents were the most tolerant in that regard. But the fact that Dustin had gone to Lucas *and* Will and *not* him...

The other two boys gave each other guilty looks, and Dustin said, “We, uh... I wanted to, but...”

“When Dustin found his powers...” Lucas said. “That was, uh, while you were in the Hospital.”

"And after you got out, you weren't exactly in the best mental place and we just never... found the right moment." Dustin added.

Mike froze over at the memory. "Oh." was all he could say, suddenly feeling very bad.

"Hospital?" Max asked, looking at him with what might be concern.

"Had an accident as a kid." Mike shrugged. "Doesn't matter."

Max seemed curious, but knew better than to pry. So she just shrugged and said, "I was in the hospital for a bit after I got my powers."

"After you *got*?" Dustin asked, looking up. "You weren't born with your powers?"

Max shook her head, not noticing Mike looking up, suddenly interested. "My Dad took me to some kinda Lab- I think he was picking something up from his friend, the whole day was kind of a blur, honestly- and I drank something I wasn't supposed to drink. Thought it was my water bottle. It was not."

"And then you ran really fast?" Dustin asked.

"And then I ran into the wall and knocked myself out." Max said. "Apparently my Dad found me vibrating on the floor and freaked out."

"So, when'd you figure out you had superpowers?" Mike asked.

"To be honest, for a couple of weeks, I thought I'd gotten drunk. I didn't know how alcohol worked back then, so, whenever I started buzzing or running too fast, I kinda thought it was hallucinatory. And then... well, my stepbrother was chasing me and I ran a bit too fast and figured out that I'd gotten powers. Unfortunately... my stepbrother figured it out, too. He kept threatening to tell Mom and Dad if I didn't let him do whatever he wanted and... well, eventually, I got sick of it, packed a bag and ran to Hawkins. Would've only taken a few minutes if I hadn't stopped to sleep a couple times."

"Why here?" Lucas asked.

"I have the *internet*, Lucas." Max rolled her eyes. "I saw that there were powered kids running around the streets and figured this was the best place to go. Anything would be better than home, really."

They all stared at her for a second, and then Mike said, "Well... shit."

"Yeah. Guess it was kinda fucked up." Max laughed awkwardly, and then turned to El. "But not as fucked up as your life. You haven't been outside the Lab for long, right?"

El looked surprised that the conversation had shifted to her, and as everyone turned to look at her, she bit her lip and blanched. "Not long." she said quietly.

"You... so you know what it's like in there?" Max asked. "Is there anything you can tell us? To help us break in tomorrow?"

"You don't have to." Mike said quickly. "If it's too... sad for you."

El glanced down at the floor, and then said, "The men there are bad. Very... bad. They hurt me."

She shuddered, and Mike instinctively reached over and placed his hand over hers. "You didn't deserve that." he said as she turned to him. "And we're not going to let them hurt you again."

She stared at him for a good, long while, and then she said, quite quietly, "Thank you."

He smiled at her. "We're friends. Friends protect each other."

"We're all friends now." Lucas said, reaching out to grab Max's hand. Max jumped, but seemed to catch his drift and reached out to grab Dustin's. Mike leaned over to join hands with Lucas, and after a second, El grabbed Dustin's extended palm.

They all held their hands in a circle for a moment, and then Max said, "So, are we gonna hold these all night, or-"

"I think we should all let go together. That's how it works in the movies." Lucas shrugged.

“On three?” Mike suggested.

“One.” Dustin said.

“Two.” Max and Lucas joined in.

“Three!” they all said- except El, who still seemed a little confused at what they were doing- and they all let go.

“There. Now we did the... friend initiation thing.” Mike said.

After a minute, Max said, “Fucking hell, we’re bad at this.”

Nancy got in the car, smiling at Steve. “Thanks for picking us up.”

“What is this about?” Steve asked, completely confused. His eyes widened as the back door opened and Jonathan Byers slid in, looking apologetic. “What’s he doing here?”

“I’ll explain on the way.” Nancy said. “Now, go. Fast.”

Steve hit the gas, letting the car shoot down the street as fast as he dared. “So,” he said, “You and brother are on the run from the government?”

“I should *hope* Mike is. I haven’t seen him all day.” Nancy admitted.

“So, what’s up?”

“They... they killed Barb and kidnapped Jonathan’s brother.”

There was silence for a minute, and then Steve said, “Okay.”

“You’re taking this well.” Jonathan muttered.

“Today’s been weird, man.” Steve sighed. “And that Lab’s creepy as fuck, I’m ready accept anything at this point.”

“Good.” Nancy said. “Cause it’s going to get crazier.”

“Are you getting tired?”

Will stifled his yawn by shoving his hand over his face. After a second, he said, “No. No, I’m fine. I wanna finish telling you about my friends.”

He’d been ranting about the Party for an hour. Talking about Lucas’s love for *Star Wars*, and Dustin’s love of science, and how cool Max’s skateboard tricks and Video Game cheats were and how great Mike’s imagination could be. And about how great his brother was at photography, and how supportive his Mom was of everything he did. And how much he missed them.

“You need sleep. If you want to escape, you can’t do that while sleep-deprived.”

“Can I stay here?” Will asked hesitantly.

“Better not.” Kali replied, making Will’s heart sink. “If they come in and hear you in the vents while you’re asleep, they could find you in here.”

“I... I don’t want to leave you.” Will said. “I don’t want to... to be alone.” Kali stayed silent, so Will continued. “Please, don’t let me be alone in here.”

“You can probably find a place close by. I’m not going anywhere until they break me.” she said. “Don’t worry, Will. I’ll be right here if you need me.”

Will was shaking now, trying his best not to cry. He hadn’t left Kali for more than a few minutes to grab food since he’d found her, and he didn’t want to leave for even longer, even if it was just to sleep.

“I *can’t* be alone in here, Kal.” He said, trying his best not to completely break down. “Before I found you, I was alone in here, and I was terrified and starving and... and I don’t want to be here, I want to go home, Kal... I want to go *home...*”

His voice broke, and the tears started. He couldn’t stop. He was sobbing now. “I want my *Mom*.”

He curled up, crying and shaking, as Kali remained silent. He wondered if maybe she'd stopped caring, if maybe she was ignoring him. That definitely didn't stop his sobs.

What did stop them was the butterfly that flew right up to him.

He stared in bewilderment and wonder as a multicolored butterfly fluttered up to him, flapping right in front of his face. He stared, eventually reaching up to wipe his face on his sleeve. It was bright, a shining light in the darkness of the vents. He reached up to touch it, and it flew right through his fingers.

"This butterfly's not real." he heard Kali said; she was much closer now, maybe right underneath him. "I've just convinced your mind that it is."

"Wh-what?" Will asked.

"That's my power." Kali explained. "Illusion. I can make people see or not see whatever I choose." She paused for a second, letting the butterfly flap around, and then she added, "I find that butterflies have a calming effect. Are you... are you feeling better?"

"A little." Will admitted.

Kali hesitated, and then said, "Just move down a few feet. It's far enough that we run the risk of them hearing you, but there's a chance that they won't. And it's not like they visit me much anyway."

"I... I could..."

"I want you to know, Will," Kali said, "That you're not alone. And it's not just me. You have your friends. You... you have your family. And you're going to get out. You're going to get out and see them again. I *will* make sure of that."

Will didn't know what to say. He just watched the butterfly, until it disappeared into the air, leaving behind some quickly dissipating colored smoke.

"Thank you, Kali." he said. He took a breath, and then said, "And I'll get you out, too."

“Okay, so we should be able to spend the night here, and we can find this ‘Bauman’ guy in the morning.” Steve said, opening the door to the Motel room. “I can take the couch, there’s a cot in the closet, and one of you can take the bed.”

“I’ll take the cot.” Jonathan volunteered.

They had filled Steve in as best they could on the ride over, including what had happened to Barb, how Jonathan had hid Nancy and how the Lab seemingly kidnapped Will- though they neglected to mention *why* he’d been abducted, as Jonathan still wasn’t sure how much he trusted Nancy’s boyfriend. Steve had taken it surprisingly well; at the very least, he trusted Nancy not to be bullshitting him for a prank. And, well, in a world where kids were running around with superpowers, nothing was really weird anymore.

“Are you sure you guys want to do this?” Nancy asked after a second, after she’d locked the door. “You probably have time to get back into town, and...”

“Don’t say that.” Jonathan said. “We’re taking down the Lab together.”

“Yeah, we’re not going anywhere, Nance.” Steve said.

At that, Nancy took a deep breath. “Well, then, I should probably... I should probably tell you something important.”

“Important?” Steve asked.

Nancy nodded. “When Barb and I... went to the Lab... it wasn’t a spur-of-the-moment thing. We’d been planning it for about two months.”

They stared at her in surprise until she continued. “We’d heard they were studying powers, a-and we figured it probably wasn’t any good, seeing as they were a government project and all the info that the government’s released about powered kids has been... not great. We got spotted this morning because I was stupid and fell off a branch trying to get a better look, that’s why we got chased off.”

“Um... okay?” Jonathan said. He didn’t understand why she thought this was such a big deal; so she’d been curious about a Lab, that wasn’t a deadly secret.

Steve caught on first. “Why... why were you two spying on the Lab, then?”

Nancy stared at the ground so she didn’t have to look at them. “Well, Barb joined in because she wanted to know what they were doing to powered people, since she was... you know. But I...” she hesitated again, now shutting her eyes tight. “Well, it’s complicated.”

“We’ve got time.” Jonathan said.

She sighed, and said, “It’s sort of about my brother... and an accident we were in as kids.”

16. The Calm Before the Shitstorm

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Calm Before the Shitstorm

Mike woke up early, staring up at the flickering ceiling. Dustin had figured out how to turn the lights off, but there were still some colorful shadows on the ceiling, like a lightshow; Dustin said that it had been installed into the room by the time they'd arrived and he couldn't shut it off. Mike was kind of glad he couldn't. It was mesmerising to watch.

He only watched for a few minutes, though, when he heard something beside him. He sat up, rubbing his eyes and kicking his sleeping bag back. He turned towards the noise, seeing El next to him. It looked like she'd slept in the wig, as it was still on her even this early in the morning. She was shaking a little, and making some kind of noise...

Oh.

"Hey?" Mike scooted closer, and he heard her stiffen and freeze.
"Hey, are you okay?"

El didn't look at him; she was probably still crying.

"It's okay to be scared." Mike said. "Or sad. Or whatever it is you're feeling. I just... I want to help."

She was quiet for a second, and then she said, "Those men were bad."

"Yeah."

She took another deep breath, and then said, "And Papa?"

Mike wasn't entirely sure how to respond. They were silent for maybe two minutes, and then El said, her voice choked and tear-filled, "Papa let them hurt me. That was bad."

“El, I’m... I’m sorry that happened.”

“They hurt my siblings. They’ll hurt Will. They’ll hurt you.”

Mike stared at the back of her head for a second, and then said, “They’ll have to catch us first. And they won’t. We’re protected, El. We can handle it. And we’ll protect you. Friends protect each other, right?”

El slowly sat up, still facing away from him. “Scared?” she asked quietly.

“What?” Mike asked. “Am... am I scared?” he paused; he didn’t exactly like talking about his feelings, but, well, if it distracted El from her own fears... “Yeah. Hell yeah. But I still have to help Will. And you.”

El paused, and then said, “Can we practice?”

“Practice?”

“In the Glass Room.”

Mike bit his lip, and slowly nodded. “Y-yeah. You want to try and transform?”

“Yes.”

“Kay. I’ll grab some books, and you can try and float those around, as like... I don’t know, a warm up or something.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.” Mike smiled, getting to his feet and going to the shelves, grabbing the books he felt would probably be missed least if they were destroyed, which was mostly the science books that looked like old school textbooks. As El ran for the door, Mike silently tiptoed around the sleeping bodies of the other kids. He managed to catch up to her, and she turned to him just as the door opened.

“Here.” Mike handed her the stack of books.

“Thank you.” El said again, taking the stack from him and shooting him a smile. She brushed a strand of the wig’s hair out of her face and turned to enter the room.

The door shut, and El was on the other side of the glass. Mike took a deep breath and retreated a few feet, trying to keep an encouraging smile on his face. El simply placed the books on the floor, and walked back, staring at them. One of the books flew off the top of the pile, flying into the air. El stared at it, and it started circling around her.

After a second, the second book flew away, too, starting to float just beneath the first book, still circling the girl. The third book flew, and then the fourth, and the fifth, and soon all the books were revolving around her. The hair from her wig started to fly, too, as if she was making her own wind. Mike watched in amazement as everything started to fly faster around her, and as she started to smile. She seemed to love what she was doing, being able to use her powers however she wanted.

She started to spin around with the books, letting out a laugh that he could barely hear from behind the glass. She looked to him, and he laughed, too. She just looked so *happy*. And she looked really pretty when she was happy... not that Mike was thinking about that.

El started spinning some more, holding out her hands, and Mike realized she was letting pressure build between her fingers, trying to gain enough energy to attempt a transformation. Air was flitting inbetween her palms, her powers slowly gaining visibility. She glanced down at her arms, possibly feeling the energy that Max had described, a small smile spreading across her face. He stepped back again, still watching in amazement.

However, before anything else could happen, they all heard a crash above them.

Whatever had happened, it had shaken the ground. El jumped, and the books all crashed to the ground around her. At the same moment, Lucas and Dustin sat up, instantly alert. Max let out a moan, muttering, “What in the hell...”

“What was that?” Lucas turned to Mike and El, noticing that they

were already up.

“Wasn’t us.” Mike said, as El started to pick the books up off the floor.

Lucas and Dustin turned to each other, and Lucas said, “Everyone get dressed, get ready. In ten minutes, Dustin and I’ll go out to see what’s going on.”

“I’ll come.” Max said, her voice still in a grumpy moan as she sat up, her hair a wild mess. “Just lemme... wake up...”

In a second, she became a blur again, rushing past everyone into and out of the bathroom. After maybe a minute, which was spent by Mike helping El with the books and Lucas and Dustin gathering fresh clothes for everyone, she burst out again, bouncing and stretching. “Who’s ready to fuck shit up?” she asked.

Nancy knocked on the door, impatiently tapping her foot. “God, this guy takes forever.” she said.

They were waiting outside the door owned by this “Murray Bauman” guy, and they’d been waiting for five minutes.

“Maybe he’s not home?” Jonathan suggested.

“He’s a conspiracy nut, Byers.” Steve said. “Those people don’t have *lives*. He’s probably just ignoring us because he thinks we’re aliens or some shit.”

“Maybe we should’ve called and arranged a meeting.” Nancy muttered.

“He’s not a businessman, he’s a nut who tried to convince my Dad that there was some weird shit going on in town.”

Nancy gave him a look. “But there *is*.”

Jonathan glanced behind them, and then paled. “Guys?”

“There’s a *lot* of weird shit.” Nancy continued. “The Lab, Will, those kids running around fighting crime, my-”

“Guys!”

Nancy and Steve turned to him, and he pointed. “Why is there a Hawkins van parked across the street?”

They all followed his gaze, seeing a white van that was indeed across the street, and sported the label *Hawkins Power & Light*.

“But we’re not in Hawkins...” Steve said.

“That’s not a coincidence.” Nancy said, shaking her head. She glanced once more at Murray’s door, and then said, “Guys, I... I think we need to go.”

“You don’t think that’s...” Steve said.

“We need to go! Now!” Nancy yelled, grabbing both boys’ hands and dragging them back towards the car.

Just as they got in, Steve glanced in a rearview mirror to see yet another white van drive up. “Shit.” he said. “Oh, shit.”

“Just *drive!*” Nancy yelled, and Steve hit the gas.

The vans, of course, followed them as they drove. Nancy shut her eyes and started muttering to herself, ranting about something under her breath.

So she didn’t see what Jonathan could see.

He glanced out the window, trying to see what the cars were doing, only to see something he didn’t expect. One of the large vans, which was starting to gain on them, shot into the air. He let out a gasp, watching it go above their heads, as Steve hit the gas harder. They were several feet away by the time the car crashed into the street, blocking the other van from continuing the chase.

“What the hell-” Jonathan began, but as he turned to the front, he saw Steve glance over to him and quietly shake his head.

“What just happened?” Nancy asked, suddenly alert.

Steve said quickly, “Car must’ve skidded.”

And he didn’t say anything else for the rest of the drive.

“Are you guys ready to go?” Lucas asked, staring up at the hole that would take them outside. All they had to do was jump up, and they’d shoot right back out into the shed.

“Of course.” Max said, bouncing on her feet. “Let’s find out what blew up in our forest!”

“I wanna see it, too. And we’ve gotta make sure it’s nothing bad.” Dustin shrugged.

Lucas turned to Mike and El, who glanced at each other. Slowly, she reached out and grabbed Mike’s hand, and then nodded.

“Let’s go.” Mike said.

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: more shit goes down

17. The Party gets out of the forest, but not Out of the Woods

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Party gets out of the forest, but not Out of the Woods

“Do you think we lost them?” Jonathan asked after a while.

Nancy rolled down the window, sticking her head out and looking behind them. “I don’t see the vans.” she said. “But that doesn’t mean shit.”

“What should we do?” Steve asked. “We’ve been driving for an hour.”

Nancy considered, turning towards Jonathan. “God, I don’t know. I thought we could get news to that Bauman guy, but if he’s not there, and the Lab was staking out his place...”

“What if we go back to Hawkins?” Jonathan suggested. “We’ll sneak in my window again, regroup, figure out a plan.”

“Back to Hawkins? They’ll be watching that place.” Nancy suggested.

“They managed to track us here, it’s not like we can outrun them.” Jonathan said. “And, besides, my Mom will flip if I’m away for more than one night.”

“Guys?” Steve said. “You know what is in Hawkins?”

“What?” Nancy asked.

“At least three vigilante kids who probably don’t want to be kidnapped by a Lab.”

The teens glanced at each other, and then Nancy said, “They can’t be that hard to find, can they?”

Jonathan bit his lip. “Think I might know where to find two of

them.”

“So, we’re going back?”

“Going back to Hawkins.” Nancy nodded. “Step on it.”

“I don’t see *shit*.” Max said, severely disappointed.

They’d got out of Castle Byers and wandered the woods a bit, searching for whatever could’ve made the blast. Max hopped from one foot to the other as they leaned against a tree, probably wishing she could just transform and speed around the woods; however, at the moment, Lucas suggested not transforming outside the Glass Room until she knew exactly what she was doing; apparently his own second transformation had almost destroyed part of his backyard.

And speaking of “destroyed”, the dirt around them seemed to have been blown up, leaving a crater in the ground that they were now standing at the edge of.

“Do you not see *this shit*?” Lucas asked, gesturing to the ground.

“Yeah, but that could’ve been *anything*.” Max rolled her eyes. “I thought we’d see, like, a criminal or a detonated bomb or some shit. I didn’t think whatever caused this mess would just disappear.”

“That’s probably a good thing.” Dustin said. “I mean, that means it’s gone, right?”

El stared off into the distance as they continued to talk, her eyes narrowing.

“Or it means that something shitty happened and we’re none the wiser.” Lucas replied. “For all we know, somebody could have died and the murderer just hid the body.”

“It sounded like an explosion.” Mike argued. “Nobody can clean up an explosion in... twenty minutes? Is that how long it took us to get here?”

“You call *this* cleaned up?” Lucas asked.

“Maybe a giant robot landed. That’d be pretty sweet.” Dustin suggested.

“Really?” Max gave him a look. “A giant robot landed, crushed nothing but one patch of dirt, and then disappeared into thin air?”

“We’re all running around with superpowers, Max.” Dustin huffed. “Nothing is impossible.”

El started to walk away, watching something in the trees. Mike turned a little. “Don’t wander too far.” he said. She didn’t acknowledge what he’d said, instead moving a bit farther.

“El?” Mike started to follow her a little as the others continued to bicker behind them. “What’s going on?”

El finally stopped, simply staring into the bushes. She pointed at something that seemed to be hanging from a tree branch, which took Mike a couple tries to spot. He slowly walked towards it, standing on his tip-toes to be able to grab it and bring it down to him. El peered over his shoulder, and he moved a little to show her what he’d grabbed: it seemed to be a bit of white fabric.

“Someone probably got their coat snagged.” Mike explained, shrugging it off.

El shook her head, grabbing the fabric herself and feeling it in her fingers, shutting her eyes. She froze for an instant, letting the wind blow through the fabric.

“Hey, guys?” Lucas said, and Mike glanced away from El for just a second to see Lucas pick up something white.

“What the fuck is that?” Max asked, rushing over to look.

“It looks like a label...” Lucas said quietly. “I... oh, shit, this is a fucking explosive.”

“What?” Dustin asked, backing up.

“Not *this*, it’s just part of the container. Probably not dangerous now.” Lucas rolled his eyes. “So something already blew up. But these things can’t be remotely detonated, they’ve gotta be activated by a gunshot, or—”

And then El’s eyes shot open, and she let the fabric drop to the ground, suddenly terrified. She grabbed Mike’s hand, trying to drag him away.

“What’s going on? El?” Mike asked, dragging her back a little and shooting looks towards the other kids, who were looking up at them with concern. “What’s wrong?”

“Bad!” El said. “They’re here! *Here!*”

“What the—” Mike said, and then Max screamed.

They all whipped around, to see her grabbing onto her leg. “What the *fuck?*” Max yelled, reaching down and ripping something out, holding it up. It looked like a small dart. “The *hell* is this?”

“Bad!” El yelled, still trying to drag Mike away. “The Bad Men are here!”

Max’s eyes widened. “Shit!” she yelled, and she started to run, her body becoming a blur. However, after only a few feet, she ran into a tree and stumbled back into normal speed. She turned around, swaying on her feet, and saying, “Oh, fuck...” before toppling to the ground.

Lucas rushed forwards to grab her before she hit the dirt, saying, “Max? Max! Are you okay?”

“Run!” El yelled. “*Run!*”

Finally, everybody started to listen to her. Lucas picked up Max and started to run; El and Mike rushed ahead of them, with Dustin bringing up the rear. They heard footsteps behind them, and Mike didn’t dare turn around to see who was chasing them.

“Where are we going?” Dustin asked, turning around for a second to shoot a bit of electricity towards their attackers.

“Go to my place.” Max said, and it sent a flare of panic through Mike’s chest to hear that she sounded numb.

“Got it!” Lucas said. “El, can you-”

El whipped around, the hair from her wig hitting her face, and she threw out her free hand. Mike heard a crash and what sounded like adults yelling. She turned around again, looking furious. Mike still didn’t dare look behind him; his heart was threatening to burst out his chest, not just from the running, but from what was going on. They were being chased. They were being *hunted*.

All they could do was run.

The children rushed through the streets, with Mike hoping to God that nobody stared at them too much. He was sure that he’d been reported missing by now, and he didn’t want any well-intentioned person stopping them before they could get to the Arcade.

Thankfully, they did reach the building, and had to slow down in order to not draw attention as they rushed in and wandered through aisles of arcade games and bored teenagers. Dustin managed to get the door to the stairwell open and shepherd them upstairs without being spotted, and soon they were all in Max’s room. El ran over to look out the window, while Lucas put Max down on the cot, saying, “Are you okay? What’s going on?”

“I’m fine... I’m f-f-fucking fine...” Max muttered, though she was clearly pretty pale and starting to stutter. She stared at Lucas and said, “I just... feel tired... I think I’m gonna s-s-sleep...”

“No, don’t do that.” Dustin said, flipping over the dart that Max had pulled out in his hands. “Looks like they gave you quite a bit of sedative. Does anyone know how to reverse a sedative?”

“Yes, Dustin, we’ve all memorized anti-sedatives. Just cause.” Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Shut up, Lucas.” Dustin said. “Mike, do you-”

He turned and cut himself off, staring at Mike behind him. Mike was shaking, staring ahead and trying to slow his breathing, gripping onto one of the arcade games until his knuckles went white. “Mike? Are you okay?”

El turned away from the window for an instant, staring at him in concern. Mike shook his head to clear it and said, “I’m fine. Don’t worry. And... and, no, I don’t know anything about sedatives.”

“Anyway, this might not be a pure sedative. Look at the color- they may have added some drugs to it. We’ll know if she starts tripping out.”

“Tripping out?” Lucas asked.

Max glanced up at them. “Why are you all so fuzzy?”

Dustin gave Lucas a look, gesturing to her. “Tripping out.”

“Maybe try electrocuting her?” Lucas suggested. “Only a little, just enough to shock her awake?”

Max giggled. “Shock.” None of them quite understood what she was finding so funny.

“I don’t know if I can do that.” Dustin said. “I don’t know how much electricity would be too much- although if I had the time, I could probably figure it out...”

“Do colors have dreams?” Max asked, starting to stare off into space.

“What the hell?” Dustin muttered.

“You can ask Will when we get him back.” Lucas said to Max, though he seemed just as confused as everybody else.

“We’ll get him back.” Max nodded. “And then we can get ice cream.”

“Oh, God, she’s cracked.” Dustin said.

“Hey, what ice cream do you think was Helen Keller’s favorite? Do you think he liked ice cream?” Max started giggling. “I like ice cream.

Iiiice creeeam.”

“You know, maybe we should let her sleep. She sounds out of it.” Dustin suggested.

“Shut up! We’ve gotta find a way to break her out of it!” Lucas said.

“You can’t just break someone out of a sedative-”

“Guys,” Max giggled, “I’m *floating*.”

El suddenly backed away from the window, and said, “Bad Men!”

In a flash, the boys jumped up, running towards the window to see a van parked outside, labelled *Hawkins Power & Light*.

“Shit, is that them?” Dustin asked.

“Shit!” Lucas yelled.

Mike immediately shut the window, running to the blanket pile to grab something to block out the view, as Lucas and Dustin ran to Max. “Max, get up!” Lucas yelled, “We’ve gotta-”

Unfortunately, Max had already passed out.

“Fuck!” Dustin yelled. “Oh, fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

“Look, we can deal with this. I’ll carry Max, we’ll climb downstairs and sneak out the back.” Lucas said.

“They’ll be watching the back! Without Max’s speed, we’re fucked!” Mike said.

“We’re not fucked, we just need to get out.” Dustin turned to El. “You ready to run?”

She hesitated, and then shook her head.

“What?” Lucas asked. “What’s wrong?”

Mike turned away from the window for a second, staring at El in shock as she said, “They’ll find us. They’ll keep finding us.”

“They just saw us in the forest, and then on the street. It’s not like they’re tracking us.” Dustin explained, running forwards and grabbing El’s hands. “Come on, we’ve gotta go.”

“What if they have the place surrounded?” Mike asked, fear starting to rise in his voice. “Like with Lucas’s house?”

“We don’t know that!” Dustin’s voice rose. “We just need to go!”

“Do you really want to run right into their vans?” Mike yelled.

“What else can we do?”

“We can fight.” They jumped and turned around, to see Lucas lifting up Max again. “Hide her behind one of the games. Mike, El, you stay there. Dustin and I will fight them. When we think it’s safe enough, we’ll get you and we’ll run.”

“You’re not going to fucking fight them! You’re gonna get yourselves killed!” Mike yelled, but Lucas had already placed Max in the corner of the room, in the shadow of an old game.

He and Dustin looked at each other, and began the transformation, letting energy spread between their hands. “Protect her.” Lucas said sharply, and after a second, El grabbed Mike’s hand and led him towards the game. Mike looked away by the point the transformation was finished, and instead turned to El. “Are you okay?” he asked carefully, his own voice shaking as he asked.

She shook her head. He gestured for her to crouch in the far corner, and once she did, he sat next to her, grabbing her hand. “We’re gonna be okay.” he said, even though he knew he was lying. “We’re gonna fight them. We’re gonna be okay.”

They sat in silence for a while, waiting. After a while, Mike heard Dustin- or Cyclone, or whatever- whisper, “It’s too quiet. They must’ve shut down the arcade.”

“Shit.” Lucas muttered, as El silently leaned in closer to Mike.

“It’s okay.” Mike muttered again, his voice breaking as he spoke, leaning over to pull Max’s unconscious body closer to them. “It’s

okay."

They heard footsteps running up the stairs, running towards them. El shrunk into the corner some more, and Mike slowly positioned himself a little bit in front of her, feeling that warmth in his fingers again. He'd protect her if he had to. No matter what.

There was a silent pause, and then the door burst open, and hell broke loose.

Notes for the Chapter:

So... remember how I said in the chapter notes at the beginning that I was researching how to write PTSD Flashbacks/Panic Attacks?

Well... let's just say that tomorrow's my judgement day...

18. Mike Wheeler and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day

Notes for the Chapter:

Soooo as I said, this chapter will include a PTSD-induced Panic Attack. I've tried to write as accurately and respectfully as possible, but please let me know if I did something wrong! I don't want to write something wrong or accidentally offensive, and I will go back and fix it if something's wrong.

BTW, this warning will also extend to tomorrow's chapter.

Thanks for reading, and especially for the comments! The comments are my favorite, I love hearing all of your thoughts!

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mike Wheeler and the Terrible, Horrible, No-Good, Very Bad Day

Dragonfire threw up a cloud of red energy the second the door flew open, and any tranq darts that were shot flew into the energy and exploded into bursts of red. Cyclone moved fast, bursting through the energy shield and shooting electricity at the men who'd entered. Mike peered around the arcade machine for long enough to see that the men who'd entered wore some kind of HAZMAT protective gear. He wondered how much that could protect them from.

El pulled him back a little, but he could still see Cyclone duck under mens' arms, slapping them in the back with electric-hands while Dragonfire stood in one place, letting his energy beams hit people and throw them against the wall. Mike could hear one of the men call on a communicator, yelling for backup. That couldn't be good.

More men were streaming in, but that didn't seem to bother either

boy. Dragonfire simply pulled more energy from the air, using it to shield himself and whack around more attackers, and Cyclone jumped on top of a broken arcade game, summoning lightning from one spot and not forcing himself to run.

El gripped onto Mike's arm some more. After a second, Mike pulled Max a bit closer to them, and started shaking her. "Max? Max, wake up!" he whispered. If he could get her awake, they could all get out.

When she didn't respond, Mike leaned back a bit and slid his phone out of his pocket, typing as fast as he could into Google- *how long do sedatives last?* His answer was 20-30 minutes. How long had Max been asleep? Maybe two minutes, tops. Fucking wonderful.

So he sat behind the arcade game, moving a little so he was again slightly in front of El, pulling up Max to sit beside him, and watching the time tick by on his phone clock. *Three minutes now. Four. Five. Six.* Cyclone and Dragonfire were still fighting, still defending them while they were hiding in the corner. *Seven.* Mike wanted to help, wanted to do something, wanted to join the fight... but he couldn't.

Eight.

He couldn't help, not with this fight. And it didn't help his nerves that he was starting to shake, that all the crashing sounds and yelling and fighting was starting to pound in his head, starting to terrify him. It was all he could do to not fall into *that* panic, to keep himself focused. *Stay focused, Mike.*

Nine.

He kept himself focused by protecting the others. He kept his arm around Max, in case she woke up, and kept his other arm in front of El, ready to defend her should one of the soldiers make it to them. However, she was starting to seem less scared as the fight went on, trying to peer around the corner and to catch a glimpse of the men, even though she was still clearly distressed.

Ten minutes. Eleven.

At that point, there was a pause. Nobody else came in, at least for

now.

“The reinforcements will be arriving soon.” Dragonfire said, summoning more energy to push the unconscious bodies away- at least, Mike hoped to God they were only unconscious.

“Fucking hell.” Cyclone groaned, collapsing on top of the arcade game. “I’m exhausted, Dragon.”

“We’ve got maybe two minutes, seeing as the vans are probably unloading now. They’ll have new weapons, probably, now that they know what they’re up against.” Dragonfire sighed.

Once he finished pushing the bodies into a corner, he turned around and rushed to the other kids. “How are you guys? How’s Max?”

Mike stared at him for a second, inwardly flinching once he realized he was still shaking, and it took him a minute to manage to respond. “Max’s still asleep. She’s got maybe eight minutes. I googled how long it’ll take to wake her up.”

El had calmed slightly, but still kept herself in the dark corner, staring up at them.

“Are you guys okay? Did you get hurt?” Dragonfire asked.

“You did good.” Mike simply said. “Is there... is there anything we can do to help?”

“We’ve gotta try and go. We can probably run before the next wave gets here.” Dragonfire said. “I can try to hold Max, but we’ve gotta get outside. We’re sitting ducks here.”

“I’ll help.” Mike offered, as the other boy struggled to pick up their friend.

“You couldn’t hold your own bookbag, you’re not gonna be able to carry anyone.” Dragonfire retorted. “Just take care of El. We’ve gotta go now.”

Cyclone jumped off the arcade game, and Mike helped El to her feet. They ran towards the stairs, jumping over scorch marks on the floor.

Mike started to feel dizzy while running down the steps, and he wondered if his friends had it worse; after all, they must still be exhausted. How much farther would they be able to run?

Unfortunately, it wasn't far. The instant that they reached the bottom of the stairs, Cyclone opened the door, and then immediately shut it. "Shit!" he yelled.

"What is it?" Dragonfire asked.

"More fucking soldiers! They're staking out the place!" he groaned. After a second, he turned to the others and said. "Okay, you guys wait in the stairwell. We'll... we'll take care of them."

Dragonfire placed Max on one of the stairs, and in a flash, they ran out the door, and Mike could hear more fighting outside.

"We've got maybe seven minutes." Mike told El, who was looking nervous again. "Then Max can speed up, and we can get out of here. Or, hey, maybe the sedative will wear off faster. She's..."

El gestured to the door, a concerned look on her face. "Lucas. Dustin. Tired."

"They'll be okay. We'll be okay." Mike reassured her, grabbing her arm and struggling to keep his voice level. "They'll be okay--"

El shook her head. "I can help." she said.

"What? No, no, El--"

"I can *help*." El said again, and then she broke away from Mike, throwing open the door and running out.

Mike jumped to his feet, rushing out the door to follow her. He stopped just outside, however, to see El throw her arms out, causing several soldiers to hit the wall. She looked furious, whipping around to throw more men into the air. Dragonfire and Cyclone stopped for a minute to stare at her, and then ran back towards the other soldiers, still hitting them with everything they could, now trying to keep them from pointing their guns at El, who wasn't even moving from one spot as she knocked men into the air.

She looked powerful- she *was* powerful. She was a force of destruction, a force of *nature*.

Holy shit.

Mike wasn't sure how long he'd been watching, when he heard a voice behind him. "Whaaat?"

"Oh, shit!" he yelled, turning around and opening the door to the stairwell again. Max was still lying on the stair, staring up at the ceiling.

He moved forwards, helping her sit up against the wall, as he said, "Max! You're awake, thank God. Are you okay?"

Max stared at him. "Mike? Why are there two of you?"

"Shit, guess that answers my question." Mike muttered. "Can you... can you run? Speed up? We need to get-"

"You know, I had the weirdest dream." Max said, her voice sounding a little strange. "You all were there, but you also *weren't*, and then this giant fuck-off turtle came in..."

"Max, I need you to focus. You just woke up from a sedative, you need to get up so we can get out of here."

Max gave him a look. "I wasn't *done*."

"I'll listen to your weird dream after we get out, okay? Do your legs work?"

She glanced down. "They feel all fuzzy."

"But do they *move*?"

Max slowly pushed herself up, grabbing onto the railing and trying to lift herself. She said, still very oddly, "Still *fuzzy*."

"What if I help you walk? Could that work?"

"I'm not a *baby*." Max snapped, and then she stepped forwards and

almost toppled over. Mike threw out his hands at the last minute to catch her, and then he put his arm around her shoulder.

“Come on, we’re getting out.” he said.

“Whoo!” Max cheered half-heartedly, and he managed to help her out of the door to the stairwell. They stared at the fight still going on—there seemed to be more men than before. How was that possible? Unless reinforcements had already arrived... in which case... *shit*.

“The fuck’s happening?” Max asked.

“The Bad Men came for El.” Mike said, as he pulled her into the shadows so they didn’t get spotted. “They’re fighting them. If we can just get you to all of them, though, we can get out of here super fast.”

“Everything’s so wild.” Max mumbled.

“Shit, what was *in* that sedative?” Mike rolled his eyes. “You’re tripping.”

“Hmm-mm, you’re just being *boring*.”

“You just need to—” Mike trailed off at the sound of a crash. He jumped, instantly whipping to cover his head and use his body to block Max, until he realized that an arcade game had been knocked over, pretty far away from them. He glanced up, looking towards the fight with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

It looked like he’d been right about the new men being reinforcements, as more were running in from the door. While El started to move, still throwing soldiers around as she made it to a more secure spot behind an arcade game, Dragonfire was jumping from place-to-place, using his energy to hit any of the men that El was missing, knocking over arcade games as he did. Every time one hit the ground, Mike felt a jolt of panic. They didn’t seem to be breaking too much—he was sure the games weren’t *fine*, but the screens didn’t shatter and nothing was on fire. The latter was especially miraculous, especially since Cyclone was on the other side of the room, shooting lightning at anything that moved. He seemed to have a new move, too; he jumped behind two men, slapping them

on the back and electrocuting them with his fingers. As they fell, he pushed himself off of them and threw himself at another crowd of soldiers.

All the loud noises- the crashes, the yelling, the screaming, the shocking, the slamming, the thudding- hit Mike's ears like a train crash. He barely noticed his own breathing growing ragged, his hands starting to shake. This was worse than upstairs- at least there, he wasn't staring the fight in the face, and El wasn't thrown in, and Max was asleep- which wasn't good, but at least she wasn't tripping out on whatever had been in the sedative.

"Heeey, buddy." Max said. "You okay? You look like the ghost of Mary Shelley just showed up to haunt you."

Haunted was a good word for it. He didn't know if the room was spinning or if it was just his head, and his stomach felt too heavy and he just wanted to shut his eyes and run somewhere else, run somewhere *safe*. But he couldn't go anywhere. He couldn't go anywhere and nowhere was safe and he was trapped. He was fucking trapped *again* and he couldn't do *shit*.

"Mike?" Max said again, her voice showing an edge of concern. "Hey, what's up?"

Before Mike could respond to Max, his attention had been drawn again to El. She was still standing behind the game- Mike thought it might be *Dragon's Lair* - and tossing soldiers around like ragdolls. But she couldn't see behind her, couldn't see more men streaming in from the back, couldn't see them point their guns at her...

No.

No.

Those guns didn't look like they shot tranquilizers.

Still feeling like the world was spinning, Mike was acting on instinct now, letting his feet carry him over towards her. Suddenly, all the noises that had been pounding in his head were increasing tenfold. He could hear *everything* bursting against his ears. He could hear Max

falling to the ground and screaming out a curse. He could hear Cyclone spot him and start yelling for him to get down, could hear Dragonfire throw more guys against the wall, and he *definitely* heard soldiers spot him and start to yell. They'd spotted him, and the gunfire and lightning and crashing and screaming was all building up, and Mike struggled to make himself heard over everything.

"Get away from her!" Mike screamed, begging himself to run faster, to reach her before those guns could go off.

El whipped around, suddenly distracted, stopping her mayhem for an instant. "*Mike?*"

He finally slid in front of her, as the guns started to go off. He didn't know what he was doing, didn't think; he just threw his hands out in front of him, using his entire body to block her, and screamed, "Get away!"

And then a bright light burst from his hands, sending the bullets flying away from them.

And Mike's entire world froze.

No.

A light still flickered in front of them, see-through but pretty bright. It went over their heads, giving them a good six-foot radius to stand in. More guns went off, and the bullets bounced away. But Mike wasn't paying attention to that.

No.

Everything seemed to be crumbling, the world was spinning faster and faster until he felt ready to throw up. That familiar feeling of heat in his fingers started to make his head feel light and his legs feel heavy, and suddenly everything but his hands was cold, and then hot, too hot, he was on fire, he was on fire *again* and he couldn't stop it. He was sweating, and his heart was pounding against his chest, and it hurt like hell, and he couldn't *breathe*. His throat felt closed up, he was going to choke on his own breath, he was shaking all over and he couldn't move.

No, no, NO!

He could barely see in front of him, and not just because of the field of light, which was still flickering in and out. Why couldn't it just go away? Beyond it, he saw the soldiers, or what might be the soldiers, it was all so *blurry*, and they were yelling, and the only words he could hear only made him shake more. "Powered... Wheeler... one of them... *here...*"

They know.

They know who I am.

What I can do.

But that wasn't even the scariest part. Because he knew what was going to happen- what happened every time his forcefields appeared- and he couldn't stop it.

Mike thought he heard more people calling him, thought he saw more soldiers carried away by red energy, thought something might be happening, but he couldn't tell. He was shaking like a leaf in a hurricane, and he felt about as calm. His eyes were filling with tears and *he couldn't stop it*.

He might have only been standing there for a few seconds, or it might have been an hour, he couldn't tell. He could never tell. He started to hear things, more things, things clearer than what was happening around him, or maybe the arcade was far away, he was somewhere else, he was *back there*.

Please... Please, no...

He could feel the heat of the room, feel the hard floor underneath his feet, and he could feel the glass wall on his fingers. And he could feel *dread*. He could feel his entire body filling up with it, the dark foreboding settling into every atom. It was coming. *It was coming*.

"Mike! Mike!"

El might have been yelling that behind him, but she was so hard to hear over the screaming. He was screaming, he was screaming

without opening his mouth, and then Nancy was screaming. She wasn't in the arcade. She was there. She was with him. She was screaming.

And then, above everything else, he heard the glass shattering.

And his light barrier shattered with it, shooting out into the air, taking the protection away. But Mike didn't care. It couldn't save him. Nothing could.

He fell to the ground, no longer able to keep himself up, and no longer able to keep himself quiet. And he wanted to scream, wanted to yell.

But he could only let out one short screech before he was on the ground, struggling to breathe, grabbing at his stomach briefly before moving up his hands to his ears, trying to block out the sound.

The sound of the glass shattering.

19. Lucas teaches El how to help with Panic Attacks

Notes for the Chapter:

Repeat of yesterday's warning: Let me know if my depiction of PTSD/Panic Attacks is bad, because I'll try and fix it.

And again, thanks for your comments! Coming up with everybody's powers was the best part of this AU. Well, until Part 2-3 at least... XD

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Lucas teaches El how to help with Panic Attacks

Something was definitely wrong with Mike.

El dropped to her knees, grabbing his shoulders to try and pick him up, but he just kept crying and fell away from her, reaching up to cover his own ears. He'd screamed and then dropped to the floor, and now he would do nothing but sob.

“Mike! Mike!” El yelled, completely and utterly lost on what to do. Something was wrong with him, he’d done... he’d done *something* to protect her, and it had done something to him, which meant it was *her fault*, and she had to fix it. She had to fix whatever had happened to him.

“El!” she looked up, to see Dustin- what did he call himself in costume? Cy-clone?- standing above her. “El, what happened?”

“Mike... made light...” she said as best she could. “And then screamed?”

Cyclone looked down at his friend, who was screaming and sobbing on the ground. His eyes widened and he called, “Dragon! I’ll get the rest of them, Mike’s having a panic attack!”

He rushed away, and Lucas- Dragonfire- rushed over. “Okay, El, I need you to help me.” he said quickly, though El noticed he sounded scared, too.

“Panic attack?” El asked him, her voice rising.

Dragonfire paused. “He- I’ve only seen this happen once, when... I’ll explain later, but it means he starts to have so much fear all at once that he can’t do anything else. It’s a side effect of the flashbacks...”

El nodded slowly; she’d had bursts of fear before, definitely, but something was definitely affecting Mike *a lot*. She glanced down at Mike, who was still sobbing and shaking.

“El, can you move him with your mind?” Dragonfire asked hesitantly. “I... I don’t know if that’ll be better or worse, but I *know* if we touch him it gets way worse, so this is a chance we’ll have to take.”

She hesitated, and then nodded. She focused on Mike, and slowly lifted him off the ground.

He definitely did *not* like that.

He started screaming, loud enough that Dragonfire reached up to cover his ears. “Shit, shit, shit, just... get him somewhere safe quickly. Try the stairwell.”

El nodded and ran towards the stairs, rushing into the open door and dragging Mike along in the air. Dragonfire followed, squeezing in before she closed the door. She tried to gently sit Mike on the ground, but it wasn’t working very well while he was thrashing about. What especially didn’t help was that as he was being lowered, he leaned over and vomited onto the bottom stair. El made sure to place him a few steps above that.

Dragonfire took a deep breath, and then clapped his hands together; in a flash, he’d detransformed. El gasped at his appearance- he looked exhausted, barely able to keep his eyes open; it had been hard to see that under the mask, but now...

“Okay, so, here’s the first thing we have to go over.” Lucas said, trying to remain calm, speaking loudly and pinching his own arm. El

felt tears well up in her eyes as she listened; what was *happening* to everyone? “Stay calm: my Dad told me how to handle this. Here’s what to *not* do. Don’t tell him to calm down, it won’t help, and he can’t help it. Don’t freak out- seriously, don’t freak out. It’ll just make him feel worse. Stay calm, just for now.” When she nodded at him, he continued. “Okay, just try to talk to him. We have to get him to focus back on reality.”

“Reality?”

“He’s... he might still be in a flashback. Even if he’s not, he’s panicking so much he might not be completely aware of what’s going on. We need to pull him back to us, to where we are.” He turned to Mike, and said, very calmly, “Mike. Mike, it’s us. Lucas and El. We’re here. Can you hear us?”

If Mike could, he didn’t respond. However, he had stopped screaming, and was now just crying and breathing heavily, grabbing at his stomach.

“Mike, you’re on the stairwell to Max’s room at the Arcade. You’re having a panic attack. Can we touch you?”

Once again, Mike didn’t say anything.

“Do you need anything?” Lucas asked. “Do you need anything, Mike?”

He turned to El. “Do you have something he can hold? If he feels something that wouldn’t be in his flashback, it might help.”

El hesitated, and then reached up, feeling her wig. She shut her eyes, braced herself, and then pulled it off, handing it over. By the time Lucas grabbed it away, she already missed the hair brushing against her shoulders, feeling slightly self-conscious about her shaved head.

“Thanks.” Lucas said, and then he turned to the boy, “Mike, I’m gonna hand you El’s wig. Hold it, okay?”

At first, El didn’t think he would take it; however, once Lucas held it out, Mike managed to grip it in his hands.

“Okay. Do you need anything?” Lucas asked again. “Do you need food? Water?”

Mike finally responded, though it was just with a simple shake of the head.

“Can you talk?”

Once again, he responded with a head shake. *No.*

“Do you need anything else?”

No.

Lucas turned to El. “H-he says that, but... I don’t know. I don’t know, this hasn’t happened in a year or so-”

“Happened?” El asked. This happened to Mike before?

Lucas flinched. “Will’s dealt with it more than I have, I’ve only seen it once, and Dustin and Max’ve never seen it at all... we shouldn’t talk about this. Mike needs to think about what’s going on *now* .”

Mike’s crying was getting quieter and slower, and his breathing a little more regular, which El hoped was a good thing. She turned to him, and said, “Mike?”

He finally opened his mouth, and said, in a voice so shaky and cracked that El felt like her heart was sinking to the floor, “I’m *sorry*.”

“Sorry?” What could he be sorry for?

“It’s not your fault, Mike.” Lucas said quickly. “It’s not your fault.”

“I’m *sorry*.” Mike repeated, refusing to look at them, keeping his eyes shut and keeping himself curled up on the stair. “I’m *sorry*, I’m *sorry* ...”

The door slowly opened, and Dustin peered in- he was also detransformed, and also looked more tired than was healthy. When he saw them, he opened the door wider. Max was next to him, gripping onto his arm as if she’d topple over without him. “We’ve got

a few minutes. How is he?” he asked cautiously.

“Not good.” Lucas replied. “How’s Max?”

“I’m not sure.” Max said, and her voice sounded strange. “I think I saw Mike summon a forcefield, but I might just be tripping the *fuck* out.”

“No, you definitely saw that.” Lucas said. “Can you run?”

Max considered. “Maaaybe. Not too far, though. Probably not back to the woods.”

“Where can we go?” Lucas asked.

Dustin paused. “I have an idea. It’s pretty close, I think.”

Lucas turned to Mike. “Mike, we’re getting somewhere safer. Can we pick you up?”

Mike hesitantly nodded. Lucas moved to lift him, but El grabbed his shoulder, shaking her head. “You’re tired.”

“I can-” Lucas said, but El cut him off with a sharp glare.

“I’ll carry him.” she said.

“Can you even do that?”

“I’ll *do it*.” El herself wasn’t entirely sure that she could lift an entire boy, but she’d be damned if she didn’t try. As Lucas slowly backed off, El reached under Mike, struggling to lift him into the air. After a second, she shut her eyes, and let her powers help her lift him a little off the ground, wrapping her arms around him. If she kept him floating, just until they got somewhere safe, she could keep her arms around him and he wouldn’t even know he was being lifted by magic. That way he wouldn’t freak out again.

“Max, grab onto her arm.” Lucas said, and Max leaned forwards, wrapping her hand around El’s left arm. As Lucas himself grabbed onto Max’s shoulder, he turned to Dustin and asked, “Where to?”

Dustin paused, and then gave an address.

Lucas hesitated, and then said, “Let’s go.”

Dustin knocked on the door for a third time. They thought they heard footsteps, but it was hard to tell.

They were at the top floor of an apartment building- it reminded El of Mike’s, but it was a different place, and the walls were a different color. They’d let Max run them into the Lobby, and then let her stop once they reached an elevator. Max probably couldn’t speedrun again if this place didn’t work out; she looked just as tired as she had when under the sedative’s effects.

The door finally opened, and in the apartment stood a tall man that El didn’t recognize. His eyes widened at the sight of the children; Dustin, Lucas and Max looked exhausted beyond belief, while Mike had been placed against the wall, where he curled up and put his head in his knees, with El sitting next to him, her hand over his. She supposed they might look a little strange, though she didn’t really know. Was this a normal thing kids did?

“Chief Hopper?” Dustin said. “Can we *please* come in?”

The man paused, and then nodded. “Yeah. What happened?”

The kids didn’t respond; Max and Dustin rushed in, while Lucas moved over to Mike and El. “Mike, El’s going to lift you again, okay? El, put him on the couch.”

El lifted him with her mind, keeping her arms around him and walking him into the house. She was starting to feel tired, too. How long had they been awake for? It couldn’t be more than two hours.

The apartment was different from Mike’s, but eventually El found a room with a couch, rushing in to lay Mike down. “Are you safe?” she asked him quietly.

Mike slowly nodded; he wasn’t crying or shaking anymore, but he didn’t look happy by any means.

El slowly sat down under the couch, playing with the hem of her dress. She wished she still had the wig- Mike had dropped it in the Arcade- as it made her feel... well, a bit more like the other kids.

After a second, Max and Dustin wandered in, and crashed on the floor. Dustin might have fallen asleep, but Max just laid there and stared at the ceiling. Lucas came in next, sitting next to El and shutting his eyes. Then Hopper entered, closing the room's door behind them. "Alright, kids, what happened? Do I need to call somebody?"

Lucas and Max jerked up, wildly shaking their heads.

"What's going on?"

They paused, glancing at each other, and then Lucas said, "Will's been kidnapped by the government. They just came after us."

Hopper glanced between them, as if trying to figure out if they were joking. Finally, he sighed and moved to the floor, sitting in front of them. "Okay. Start from the beginning."

Jonathan walked into his house carefully, eyeing the place and looking for movement. After a second, he said, "Alright, guys, hurry in."

Nancy and Steve pushed past him. "Just hide in my room. I'll be right there." Jonathan said, as he ducked into the kitchen. They hadn't eaten at all that day, and he'd offered to grab something from the pantry to pass out to them. His Mom didn't seem to be home-

"Where have you *been*?"

Scratch that.

Jonathan turned around to see his Mom standing behind him, arms crossed. He hadn't even seen her there. "I-I told you, I went just out of town to see if Will got lost-"

"That's bullshit, Jonathan." Joyce said, and Jonathan jumped.

“You’ve been gone all night and all day. I was starting to think that you were... God, Jonathan, are you going to *tell* me where you are, or-?”

“Looking for Will, Mom, I swear!”

Joyce gave him a look. “And those other two kids were with you?”

Jonathan froze. How’d she seen them? “Wh- no, no, I’m just... trying to help them...”

“Jonathan, I need you to be *honest* with me.” Joyce said. “Tell me where you went.”

“Look, I swear,” Jonathan said. “I *was* looking for Will. I wasn’t skipping out on him. I can’t tell you right now, but-”

Joyce gave him one look, and then she vanished in front of his eyes.

He let out a screech, jumping back. She had been right in front of him, and within a second, she had completely vanished, almost as if the air had overtaken her. He turned around, trying to see if she’d ducked under a table or something- not that he could think of why she would. When he turned back, however, she appeared again.

She *couldn’t* have just ducked under something.

She had turned completely invisible.

As he gaped at her, she simply said, “Really, Jonathan, where did you think you and Will got it from?”

20. It's honestly a miracle that these Kids have survived this long

CHAPTER TWENTY

It's honestly a miracle that these Kids have survived this long

“And that’s when we showed up here.” Lucas finished, glancing at Dustin, who’d eventually awoken again and sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Dustin thought it was a good idea.”

“You left us your address for if we found out anything about Will.” Dustin yawned. “I figured, well, this counted.”

Hopper stared between the kids. El wondered how much he was processing; she herself wasn’t entirely sure how the last few days had gone. She’d been thrown into the outside world and spent the last few days in a storm of chaos, and at this point, honestly, she just wanted to go back to Mike’s apartment and eat Eggos and watch TV.

“So,” Hopper said, gesturing to Lucas and Dustin, “You two are technically runaways”, he pointed to Max, “You’re *actually* a runaway,” he pointed to Mike- who was still curled up on the couch, staring into space- “He’s not doing too good right now,” and finally he pointed to El, “And you’ve been raised in a Lab and only just escaped three days ago.”

Was it only three days? She’d escaped at the beginning of one day, spent two nights at Mike’s, and then one night at Castle Byers.

As they all nodded, El thought back to Lucas’s story. He’d neglected to mention that anybody but El had powers- he’d probably figured that it was unavoidable to mention why she’d been in the Lab, but he’d brushed over the powers of the others, instead simply saying that they’d been attacked and Mike had gone into a panic attack before El could fight the Bad Men off- and he’d also omitted the fact that they’d hid in Castle Byers- he simply said that they went to the Arcade. But he brought up what Hopper needed to know- that Will

was kidnapped by the Lab, the fact that they still had him and Eight, and that they'd all almost been abducted as well for hiding El.

"So," Max asked, "What are we gonna do?"

"You can do something, right?" Dustin asked Hopper. "Go into the Lab and arrest people for being dickholes? Right?"

Hopper gave him a look. "Uh, no. It doesn't work like that, kid."

"Why not?"

"Well, for starters, I'm pretty sure if those guys were willing to kill you for causing them trouble, they could make anyone trying to dig into what they're doing disappear."

"So we can't do *anything*?" Lucas asked, glaring at him.

"I'm not saying that." Hopper glanced between them. "But *you kids* are staying here."

"Absolutely fucking not." Dustin said quickly.

"We've got to help." Max said. "They've got our friend."

"This isn't negotiable. You're not going." Hopper said, standing up.
"Listen, I'm going to call a friend-"

"They've got the phones bugged." Max informed him. "Probably."

Hopper gave her a quick look, and then said, "I'm going to call a friend, and trust me, I'm not bugged. I'll tell you what we're doing once I get back. Stay here."

They all gave him glares as he left, and as soon as the door shut, Max said, "We're not fucking staying here, are we?"

"Of course not." Lucas said. "But I'd like to see what his 'friend' said-hopefully said friend is the army." He turned back to Max. "You doing okay?"

"Well, I don't *think* I'm tripping out anymore." She glanced up at the

ceiling, looking very disappointed in herself. “God, I was insufferable. Are you guys alright?”

Lucas glanced between them. “Well, I’m tired, but I think I’m alright. Dustin?”

“I’m okay for now.” Dustin said. “El?”

El nodded, and at that, they all looked to Mike. He was still curled up on the couch, and still blankly staring ahead. El was the first one to speak. “Mike?”

He glanced down at her, his eyes finally flickering to life. But he didn’t look happy at all; he looked... sad? Angry? Guilty? It was hard to tell. She’d barely seen people act emotional around her, so reading expressions was uncharted territory.

“Are you doing okay?” Lucas asked.

Mike sighed, moving slightly to stare up at the ceiling. “How okay do you *think* I am?”

They were all silent for a minute, before Lucas said, “You know it’s not your fault, right? It’s a psychological response to trauma, it’s not because...”

“Because I can’t handle it?” Mike said bitterly, turning to glare at his friend.

Lucas stared him down, saying, “I didn’t say that. This shit isn’t your fault, and you know that. You know what I meant.”

There was silence for a long while, where Mike and Lucas continued to stare at each other and everyone else started to feel pretty uncomfortable.

Finally, Dustin said, “I... I didn’t realize it got that bad.”

Mike groaned, finally moving his gaze to the ground and managing to sit himself up on the couch. “Yeah, well, it’s not like I went out of my way to have panic attacks, so it’s not like you could’ve known.”

Lucas quickly changed the subject, sending Mike an apologetic glance. “Try not to mention our powers to Hopper. We don’t want him to find out.”

“Why not?” Max asked. “He might think we’re more capable if he knows what we can do.”

“He’s a Police Officer.” Lucas explained. “They don’t like us much.”

“But it’s *Hopper*.” Dustin argued. “He’s really cool, and he’s never tried to attack us.”

“Even if he’s alright with powers, it’s part of his job to arrest vigilantes, which we definitely are.” Lucas said. “So either we let him do his job and we get arrested and identified, or we ask him to risk his occupation in order to hide us. It’s better if we just keep him in the dark.”

They were quiet for another minute, and then Dustin turned to Mike. “So... you’ve got powers, too?”

Mike sighed, glancing down to the side to avoid looking any of them in the eyes. He nodded slowly.

“Who else knows?” Lucas asked.

Mike shook his head. “N-no one. No one else knows.”

Max said, a little jokingly, “So you were giving us shit for not talking about our powers, and you were just never gonna mention yours?”

Lucas waved his hand over his throat, shaking his head at her; he’d apparently figured something out that Max hadn’t. Unfortunately, Mike decided to respond. “It’s different.”

“How’s it different?” Max asked again, and Lucas looked ready to tackle her.

Mike was silent for a long time, and El thought at first that he wasn’t going to answer. And then he said, his voice shaking slightly, “If... if I told you guys that I had powers, I’d... I’d have to show you, or you wouldn’t believe me. You’d think I was lying to fit in, or seem cool

or... and you guys just... you just use your powers all the time, it's not a big deal, but whenever I use mine..."

"You have a flashback." Lucas guessed.

Mike nodded.

"How long has this been happening?" Dustin asked.

"Since the accident." Mike said, and Dustin and Lucas both flinched. El and Max glanced at each other; finally, somebody else was just as confused as El at the moment.

"Accident?" Max asked.

Mike gave her a dark glare, and after a second, said, "I don't want to talk about it." Max glanced away quickly, and then Mike said, "The point is, I can't use my powers without freaking out."

"How long have you known you had them?" Lucas asked.

Mike shut his eyes tight, wrapping his arms around his knees. "About a month out of the hospital. I don't even remember what was going on, but I summoned a small forcefield, and... yeah, you can guess what happened. Someone was with me- I think it was Nancy? She didn't see the field, but she calmed me down enough and... and every time I tried the powers, it happened again, so I just stopped. Every time, it just reminds me of... shit, this doesn't matter."

"It *does* matter, Mike." Dustin said. "You're having flashbacks and shit and we want to help you."

"I don't need *help*." Mike said. "Will does. Are we still going for the original plan?"

They all glanced at each other; they weren't done talking to Mike about this, but he didn't seem to want to discuss his powers. "For now." Lucas said. "But we'll see what the Chief's planning."

They glanced at each other, and Max said, "So, do you think he's gonna let us sleep here? We left all our stuff at the Castle."

“Shit, we *did* leave all our stuff at the castle.” Dustin groaned. “Do you think the bad people will find it?”

“If they take all our shit, I’m gonna murder them all.” Lucas said. “Unless you want the first shot, El.”

El looked at him in a panic- why would he so casually ask her if she wanted to kill people?- until he started laughing. Oh, oh. He was joking. Alright, then.

“Yeah, El, you were super badass!” Dustin said. “Those fuckers didn’t stand a chance!”

“I only saw like, a bit, but it *was* pretty cool.” Max added.

El felt her face go red, and she shrugged and curled up. She didn’t really want to talk about the fight; she’d done what she had to, to protect her friends. It wasn’t something to applaud. She glanced up at Mike, and he seemed to notice her discomfort.

“Let’s not talk about the fight.” Mike said, and then he paused, seemingly realizing something. “Let’s talk about the Lab. Specifically you, Max.”

“What’d I do?” Max glanced at him, pushing some hair out of her face.

Mike hesitated, and then said, “Well, apparently they can stop you from running if you get injected with sedative. So, it can’t be safe for you to go into the Lab alone, now, in case they spot you.”

Max huffed. “Shit, you’re right.”

“I’ll go with her.” Lucas offered. “Mike, El, you two can wait with Dustin while he manipulates the cameras- that is, if our plan doesn’t change with whatever Hopper’s doing.”

Dustin considered. “Who do you think he’s calling, anyway?”

“The *army*, hopefully.” Lucas said, rolling his eyes. “I can’t think of anyone better, can you?”

“Alright, guys, don’t freak out,” Jonathan said, “But my Mom’s involved now.”

Nancy and Steve looked up in complete shock. “ *What ?*” Nancy yelled.

Jonathan flinched. “Uh, she kinda... she’s...” he turned around, and then froze. “Oh. Uh, she’s not here. I thought she was...”

In a minute, Joyce appeared, leaning against the wall. Nancy and Steve both screamed, and Jonathan said, “*Mom*. Please stop doing that!”

“I haven’t done this in years, I’m a bit out of practice.” Joyce shrugged, before turning to the two teens, confused. She glanced at Steve, and said, “I don’t believe we’ve met?”

“Uh, Steve Harrington.” Steve introduced. “And you... you just...”

Joyce sighed. “Yes. I can camouflage. Into any environment. It’s actually pretty useful, used it mostly as a teen to-”

“How did...” Nancy glanced between her and Jonathan. “How did you find out we were here?”

“Honestly?” Joyce said. “I *just* got a call from a friend to tell me that Will had been kidnapped by Hawkins Lab, and I seem to recall getting a panicked call from Karen yesterday saying that members of the Lab had shown up and told her that her children were wrapped up in some kind of conspiracy. And since you told me you were looking for Will overnight, Jonathan, I assumed that you were actually checking out the Lab, and that you were at least with one of the Wheelers.”

Then she shrugged, and added, “And, also, I spotted you all walk into the house. You’re really bad at sneaking around, which I guess is good for me.”

The teens all glanced at each other, and then Joyce said, “Well, what are your powers?”

“What?” Nancy shot up, shaking her head. “No, no, no, I don’t have...”

She turned to the boys, and Steve said, rather slowly, “Uh, no, Ms. Byers. She hasn’t got powers.”

Joyce studied her for a second, and then turned to Jonathan. “I know yours has something to do with your photos, right?”

Jonathan hesitated and then nodded, reaching into his pocket to pull out a picture; it was a black-and-white photo of one of his old books-*Dracula*. He held it in his hands, feeling the edges and focusing. After a second, the picture turned into a flash of gray smoke, and then he was holding a perfect copy of the book in his hands. Well, not *perfect* - it was in shades of gray while the original book was black and red, and the inside pages would be blank.

Steve gasped in surprise; he hadn’t seen the power before. Nancy glanced at the ground. Joyce watched, and then said, “Does it only work on old photos?”

Jonathan shook his head. “But I like using black-and-white. It differentiates my items from the real thing.”

“And can they turn back into photos?”

“Yes, but it takes a bit more energy.” Jonathan explained. “I’ve also found that if they’re damaged, they’ll show up damaged in the picture once it goes back. And I can’t summon living things.”

Joyce gave him a quick smile, and she said, “That’s a great power, Jonathan.”

Jonathan shrugged. “It’s not that cool. Will’s is better.”

“What is Will’s?”

“I... I shouldn’t say. He wouldn’t want me to...”

Joyce gave him a look, and then turned to Steve. “And you?”

Steve glanced away. “I, uh, don’t do much. I can play basketball

pretty well.”

Nancy said, “Steve isn’t powered. He would’ve told us if he wa-”

Joyce held up her hand, and then said, “Steve, please. Nobody here is going to turn you in. But if you’re planning on invading Hawkins Lab, we need to know what everybody can do.”

“But he-” Nancy began.

“Gravity.” Steve interrupted quite quickly. They all stared at him, and then he said, “It’s... kinda dangerous to do inside, but I can manipulate the gravity around me. Really does help during sports, but not much of anything else.”

Nancy gave Steve a horrified and confused look. “Steve?”

Steve glanced at her, and then away. “I-I’m sorry, I wanted to tell you, but, you know... Ms. Byers, how did *you* know?”

“I’m good at figuring out when somebody’s hiding something. Something you pick up when you’ve got your own things to keep secret.” Joyce gave Nancy another sharp look, and then asked the boys, “Does anyone else know about your powers?”

While Steve shook his head, Jonathan said, “Will knows about mine.”

“Okay, good.” Joyce said. “So nobody can warn the Lab about what they’re up against, unless they’ve still got me in their databanks.”

“Wait, does someone know about your-” Jonathan began.

Joyce cut him off. “You guys have any plans on getting Will back?”

“You seem oddly okay with three teenagers storming a government building.” Nancy said cautiously.

Joyce sighed. “First of all, you would not *believe* what kind of shit I got up to as a teenager. Second, nothing I’m going to say is going to stop you, so I might as well do my best to have us work together to get Will back, especially if he’s in that Lab.”

After a second, Steve said, “Actually, no, we don’t have a plan.”

“Hmm.” Joyce glanced at the ceiling. “Well, in that case, I’m going to have to call Chief back, and then what we’re going to have to hide the kids somewhere, and-”

“Kids?” Nancy said, shooting to attention. “What kids?”

Joyce hesitated, and then said, “Well, apparently your brother and his friends are hiding in Hopper’s house with a fugitive. That’s all he’d tell me.”

Nancy stared at her in shock and horror. Steve simply said, “You know what? Knowing those kids, I’m not that surprised.”

21. Hopper tries unsuccessfully to make five kids do something sensible

Notes for the Chapter:

So Ao3 is being weird af rn, so I'm not sure if you all will be able to even see this, but might as well post it anyway. Thanks for your lovely comments! Those really are the highlights of my day, I'm always excited to see that notification!

Another more unfortuant update: I've got another College visit. This will be a lot shorter, but I will be gone all of Thursday and probably all of Friday. If I don't post on Friday, I'll post again on Saturday. So, to recap, there will be a mini-Hiatus on Thursday-Friday this week. Sorry about that!

Now, on with the show!

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hopper tries unsuccessfully to make five kids do something sensible

“Will’s Mom is in on this, too?” Dustin asked.

The kids were now sitting in the kitchen, squeezing themselves around the small table. Hopper only had two kitchen chairs, too, so they had to drag some more from other rooms of the house, and even then, El and Mike had to share one, which El didn’t seem to mind. Mike still wasn’t looking anybody in the eye, though.

“You called *her* instead of the army?” Lucas added, giving him a glare.

“The army won’t be able to do shit against that Lab.” Hopper said. “Hawkins Lab is government-run, so even if they don’t know or support what’s going on there, they’re still under the same

management.”

“So why’d you call Ms. Byers?” Max asked. “No offense to her, but I can’t really see her breaking into a secret organization and fighting bad guys.”

“Actually, I kinda can.” Lucas said. “This one time, she took Will and me to the park, and some kid pushed Will off the swing. That kid’s parents were being assholes about it, and... well, I’m pretty sure she would’ve murdered them if she could’ve gotten away with it.”

“She deserves to know where her son is.” Hopper explained. “And she’s coming to help. She just said she’s bringing her other kid, too.”

“I think Jonathan might be able to help us even less than Ms. Byers.” Dustin sighed. “All he does is listen to heavy metal and take photos of things.”

“I’m sure if Joyce thinks he’ll be useful, he’ll be able to help.” Hopper rolled his eyes. “We’re going to find some place to stash you kids, and then we’ll get Will back.”

“Stash us?” Mike asked, glaring up at Hopper. “We’re not going anywhere!”

“We’re not sending five twelve-year-olds into battle.” Hopper said. “I think I might have a safe spot for you all to hide, and once we shut down the Lab, we’ll figure out what to do about her.” He gestured to El, who gave him a glare. “Hopefully, we’ll be able to find your birth parents and with some good luck, they won’t be assholes.”

“We want to *help*.” Mike said stubbornly.

“You can help by staying here.” Hopper said.

At that moment, there was a knock at his door.

“*Stay here.*” Hopper repeated, as he got up.

The second he left the room, Mike turned to the others. “I move the motion that we escape to Castle Byers.”

“Second!” Dustin and Lucas both said quickly.

“Grab on.” Max said, holding out her arm. “Think I might be able to run now. Let’s see how far we can get.”

Hopper opened the door and look at the group. “Joyce, thanks for coming.”

“Don’t thank me, it’s my son that’s in there.” Joyce said, pushing her way in. “Shut the door, we don’t want anyone watching us.”

Looking a little confused at the teens who entered behind her, Hopper shut the door behind them, and then said, “What are they doing here?”

“They killed my friend.” Nancy said, her voice breaking a little. After a second, she asked, “Wh-where’s Mike?”

“Kitchen.”

Nancy turned to go, leaving the boys behind her. Once she was gone, Joyce gestured to the remaining teens and said, “They’re like us, Hop.”

Jonathan and Steve both turned, shocked, to Hopper. He simply glanced at them, before saying, “So the Lab’s a danger to them, too.”

“Nancy claims she hasn’t got any, but she’s hiding something.” Joyce said. “I think she knows something she’s not telling us, about the Lab or-”

“Sorry, since how long have *you* had powers?” Steve asked, turning to Hopper.

Hopper hesitated, and then said, “A long time. Joyce, I thought we agreed we weren’t going to-”

“Hopper, this is my *son* .” Joyce said sternly. “And God knows how many other children. We can’t just *sit here* because we fucked up in the past, not when we can fix this.”

Before Hopper could respond, and before a stunned Jonathan and Steve could say anything, Nancy walked in. “Hey! Mike’s not here.”

“What?” Hopper said, whipping around.

He ran out of the room, followed by the rest of the group. Once they got to the kitchen, they saw that it was indeed, empty, with a note scrawled on a napkin. Hopper picked it up, reading the words *Gone Leavin’.*

“I’m gonna fucking kill them.” he muttered.

“Thank God, they didn’t find us.” Lucas said, after doing a quick check of Castle Byers. “Everything’s still here.”

“I wonder how they found us in the woods.” Max said.

“My guess? They caused the explosion to see if we were nearby.” Dustin shrugged.

“Do you think that they know we’re here, then?” Mike asked worriedly.

“Probably not. They just saw us show up. Besides, I don’t think they’d be able to activate the trap-floor without the password.” Dustin said.

Lucas turned to all of them. “Do we *really* need to talk about this right now? What we need to do is transform, and then get to the Lab to get Will out. Max, in the glass.”

“Are you guys sure you can transform so soon?” Max asked, glancing between the boys. “You’ve gotta still be exhausted.”

“If you’re fine, we’ll be fine. We’ve gotta get to Will before the thunderstorm passes.” Lucas said. “It should still be tonight, and we’ll have a cover for when Dustin knocks out the cameras.”

Max hesitated, before going behind the glass.

“You two should stay here.” Lucas said, gesturing to Mike and to El,

who had moved back to the bookshelf and had pulled a few down. “They won’t be able to get to El, and Mike, you can protect her.”

Mike glared at him. “Or I can stay out of the way so I don’t fuck everything up again.”

“You didn’t fuck everything up, Mike.” Dustin said carefully, as Max started to flap her hands behind the glass. “It wasn’t your fault, and we survived fine.”

“What happens if the Lab comes here, and I freak out, and get me and El kidnapped?” Mike asked, his voice shaking a little. “What happens if I do something wrong and kill us both? Just because I can’t fucking control my own fucking powers!”

They all jumped as they heard a *zap* behind them, and turned to see Max had transformed again. She exited the room, and glanced between everyone. Finally, she moved over to Mike and sat beside him. “Mike,” she said, “You’re annoying. I’ll give you that. But you’re a good fucking person. You don’t deserve this.”

Mike stared at her, as she continued. “I can’t tell you that any of that shit’s impossible, I’m not going to pretend that it’s not. But it’s super unlikely. Because you might not have control of your powers, and you might have a panic attack whenever it happens, but that’s not your fault. And you don’t need powers to protect El. Just use whatever’s around you. You’ve got an entire wall of weapons, Mike!” She took a breath, and then said, “But... you don’t deserve to be scared of yourself.”

There was something in Max’s voice that almost cracked, almost made her start to cry. Mike still stared at her, and after a while said, in an almost joking tone, “I can’t use those weapons. I don’t know how.”

Max stood up again, running to one of the bags against the wall. She pulled out a flashlight, and tossed it to him. He caught it, and she said, “If you get attacked, you beat the shit outta someone with this. Trust me, it hurts like hell.”

There was more silence for a bit, before El went to sit by Mike as

well, putting her hand over his. Dustin and Lucas transformed then as Mike glanced down at the flashlight, shoving it into his jacket pocket and then getting up to get more books.

“Okay, let’s go out. We should probably walk the way, then Max can save her speed for later.” Dustin said.

“No, I’ll speed us there.” Max shrugged. “If I need a break, we’ll have plenty of time until the thunderstorm arrives.”

El got up from the mattress, watching as the others walked on, ready to jump back into the hole to shoot back up into the forest.

However, as they jumped into the air, they crashed back onto the mattress.

El and Mike turned to stare at them, as they tried to jump again, and crashed again.

“What the *fuck*?” Dustin yelled, horrified.

“Why isn’t it working? Is it broken? Has it ever been broken before?” Max asked.

Lucas shook his head. “Let’s try again?”

They jumped again, and as they crashed, they heard a laugh. They turned, to see Mike, a smile finally across his face. “God, I know this is serious and shit, but you all look ridiculous.” he said.

It was nice to see Mike smile again. It’d probably be nicer if this wasn’t such a distressing circumstance.

“What the actual *fuck* is going on?” Steve asked.

Joyce had rushed to another room, saying something about running through some kind of protocol. Nancy had grabbed Hopper’s phone and locked herself in the bathroom, desperately trying to call her brother. After quickly bringing Hopper up to speed on the situation, Jonathan had run off to follow his Mom, leaving Steve alone with the

Police Chief.

“Honestly, kid, I have no idea. But I’m calling into the Station to tell them not to expect me today- I was supposed to come in later to report on the whole ‘missing kid’ thing.” Hopper said.

“*Why do you have powers?*” Steve asked.

Hopper gave him a confused look. “*Why?*”

“Yeah, what happened? Freak accident? Super-drugs? Fucked-up genetics? Are you an alien?” Steve huffed.

“*Why do you have powers?*” Hopper redirected the question.

“I don’t fucking *know*, they just showed up one day.” Steve shrugged. “Playing outside and suddenly I knew how to make things fly. I thought that Lab was supposed to be studying where they came from, but apparently they’re just killing whoever’s got them.”

“I don’t think that was the intention, otherwise they would’ve just killed Will, not kidnapped him.” Hopper said quietly, looking like he was trying to figure things out as he was talking. “And that girl the other kids were hanging around with- they called her El- she was apparently raised there. She said other kids were there, too.”

“So, what? They’re studying powered kids?” Steve asked. “So why’d they kill Barb? She out of the age range?”

“She may have posed a threat, or her death may have been an accident.”

“She was a teenage girl wandering in the woods! Couldn’t they just knock her out for a bit?”

Hopper thought for another second, and then said, “Are you sure Nancy told you everything in her story?”

“Y-yeah. She wouldn’t lie.” Steve said. They didn’t like to lie to each other; of course, he’d never told her that he had powers, but that was more of a lie by omission than anything else. She’d never *asked*.

“You sure about that?”

“O-of course. But, hey, let’s talk about you again. You and Ms. Byers have some sort of weird superhero history?”

Hopper glanced away, moving towards the phone. “We were teenagers. Thought we could save the world.”

“Well, what happened?”

All Steve got as an answer was a dark glare, and a simple, “We got older.”

22. Mike gets to vent about how much his life sucks

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, once again, we're on a mini-hiatus from Thursday-Friday. I will be back on Saturday with a chapter on what the teens + adults are up to, but for now, we've got probably my fav chapter so far, mostly because Mike's backstory is a huge part of the fic and we're learning [almost] all of it right here! :D

See y'all on Saturday!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Mike gets to vent about how much his life sucks

El didn't feel like sleeping.

They'd been stuck in the Castle all day, routinely jumping up on the mattress to see if it would pick them up in the wind current and get them out. Dustin suggested electrocuting the trap-floor to try and set it on fire, but Lucas pointed out that would render it useless, and they had no way to repair it.

"This is such *bullshit*." Max said after a while, leaning against the glass. "We're supposed to be saving Will, but we can't because we *locked ourselves in*."

"El, can you try flying up the tunnel and seeing what the problem is? Maybe push on the trap-floor?" Lucas asked cautiously.

El nodded and lifted herself into the air, flying up the tunnel until she reached the top. However, no matter how much she pushed it and punched it, the trap-floor refused to budge.

"Maybe someone came in and pushed something heavy on top of it." Dustin suggested once she came back down.

“Over the whole floor?” Mike asked skeptically.

“Do you think the trap-floor might have a mind of its own?” Lucas considered, glancing up at the ceiling. “Maybe there’re bad people above it, and it won’t let them down.”

“So, you think it won’t let the assholes from the Lab down here, but it will let a bunch of pre-teens into a room with a wall full of weapons?” Dustin asked.

Lucas shrugged. “It’s a theory.”

They waited some more, but the tunnel never opened. Around the time Mike’s phone flashed *10:00*, he said, “You know what? Let’s try again in the morning.”

“We’ll miss the thunderstorm!” Max said harshly, after falling on the mattress again. “We’ll miss our chance to free Will!”

“We’ll miss the storm, yes, but we’ll still be able to get to Will.” Mike said.

“Yeah, you know what? Screw the storm.” Lucas said, after a second. “Screw it!”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Dustin asked, looking up from his book.

Lucas glared at him. “We don’t *need* cover anymore. The Lab already knows who we are, so it’s not like we need to hide from them exactly *who* broke into their Lab. We’ll just go with the original plan, but without cover.”

“But they’ll know *something* knocked out the cameras.” Max said.

Lucas gestured to her. “Yeah, but with you, they’ll have maybe thirty seconds to figure that out before we’re out of there.”

The kids all glanced to each other, and then Mike said, “Well, I’m not going, so it’s up to you three.”

Max shrugged. “Sure. Whatever.”

It was after that when they pulled out the sleeping bags again, deciding to get as much sleep as they could before trying the trapdoor again. Max fell asleep first, her hands wrapped around the extra blanket. Dustin and Lucas were next. El stayed up, though. She didn't like falling asleep; it made her feel vulnerable. She couldn't stay on guard while she wasn't awake. And besides, nightmares were a pretty common occurrence.

So she was awake when above them, the thunderstorm started. It was far away, too far away to hurt them, but she could hear the thunder. It was starting to worry her, so she got up a little, intending to go over to Mike, who she thought might still be awake, to ask him to explain the thunder to her. He knew a lot, he might be able to take the time to explain where the sound came from.

She stopped, however, when she heard him start to cry.

Mike had been staring at the wall for the past few hours while everyone else fell asleep. He wasn't tired, really. He didn't want to have another nightmare, either. When the thunder started, he tried to shut his eyes, remembering that they had to get sleep, that he couldn't be tired while he was protecting El.

But how was he supposed to protect her? The last time he'd tried, he'd broken down in the middle of a battle. The others could've died while he was crying on the floor, and he wouldn't have been able to do *anything*.

He didn't realize he was crying again until he heard a quiet, "Mike?"

He sat up instantly, turning around to see El. She'd walked over to him, and she looked concerned. Of course. Of course she'd heard him fucking crying. Of course she knew what an idiot he was. Maybe he could still fix it, if he pretended that nothing was wrong.

So he pushed himself up, wiped his eyes on his sleeve, and said, "El! El, hi! I was just... you can't sleep?"

El gave him a look. "Sad?"

Goddamnit.

“No, no, I’m fine. Are you okay?”

El glared at him. “Friends don’t lie.”

Mike snorted. “Sorry, but it turns out that’s bullshit. Look at us, El. None of us thought to tell each other that we all had powers. Max didn’t tell us her family’s all the way across the country. I didn’t tell anyone that I have fucking panic attacks whenever I try to make a forcefield or when anything shatters near me or—”

Shit, he was crying again. He tried to turn away, but El bent down and grabbed his hand. “Mike. You’re not fine.”

He tried to take more deep breaths, tried to keep himself from crying too much. He’d done enough crying that morning. He didn’t want to cry again.

“Talk?” she asked carefully.

“You want me to talk?” he asked.

She looked him dead in the eye. “Do *you* want to?”

No, he didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t want to *think* about it. But, for some reason, he got up anyway, kicking off the sleeping bag and moving to sit on the mattress, staring blankly at the wall as El followed and sat next to him. He didn’t want to look at her, cause then she would see how close he was to crying again. He waited until the next peal of thunder passed, before he said, “I- I just want to be able to help, you know?”

Mike sighed, and continued. “Will’s been kidnapped. One of my best friends has been abducted, and they’re doing God knows what to him, and now we’re on the run from the people who took him. Lucas and Dustin have been running around for a year throwing themselves into danger, and Max is living on her own and you’ve been tortured for basically your entire life and... and I can’t do *anything*.”

That dread was building in his chest again. He hated feeling helpless. That was his *problem*.

"And of course, my power is forcefields. All I have to do is figure out how to use them, and I can protect my friends. But I can't even do *that* right. I can't do that without thinking about... how I got them..."

He was silent for a good several minutes, taking more deep breaths and trying to keep himself calm. El was quiet, too, which was a bit unexpected. He'd expected her to try and get him to talk about it, to ask him questions, to try and force him to open up, but she was just quiet. It was kind of a comforting silence; he knew she was there, and she was listening, she wasn't just ignoring him, she actually cared. It was a silence he rarely heard.

"I... I was nine." he finally said. "I was nine and Nancy was thirteen and we were *stupid*."

He didn't want to talk about it. He'd *never* wanted to talk about it. Not after it happened, not after he left the hospital, not after Nancy caught him having a flashback, not when Will and Lucas caught him having more, not when the fucking therapist tried to make him say *anything*. He'd never talked about it before, not even to himself. But for some reason, it was all spilling out. Maybe it was the lack of sleep, or maybe the effect that his last flashback had on him, or maybe it was just El's silent comfort, or just a combination of everything that had happened the last few days. He didn't know, and it didn't matter.

"We were shopping with Mom and Dad, and there was a fire or something and everyone was evacuated, and Nancy and I got separated from our parents and we followed some guy who looked like our Dad from behind for a bunch of blocks and by the time we figured out our mistake, we were lost." He spoke fast, as fast as he could so he wouldn't have to think too hard about what he was saying, so he wouldn't have to think about what had happened. "We were *so lost*. I was crying, and Nancy was trying to be brave, and it started to rain so we ran into the first shed we could find. And I tripped and fell on something and there was a staircase, there was a hidden room and... God, we were *stupid*."

He was crying again. Why did he have to keep *doing this*? "We went down, cause we were dumb kids, and... no, no, I went down. I went down because I wanted to see what was down there. I was so dumb! I

was so dumb!"

She had to know he was crying now. He couldn't keep it out of his voice. His voice was shaking and cracking and he couldn't *stop it*. "I went down there and Nancy followed to make sure I was okay, but she stayed far behind because she was smarter than me. That's why she didn't get affected, because she wasn't anywhere near me. A-and there was this room, at the bottom of the stairs. It was mostly empty, it was cold and dark, but then there was a... the glass wall. In the middle."

He took another deep breath, gripping onto the mattress to keep his focus. He couldn't panic now. He just had to keep talking. Just keep talking. "And there was something glowing behind it- the doctors said that it was some experiment going on, the guy doing it ended up fleeing town after they found us in there, but I didn't know that. I just saw something glowing, it was glowing so many colors, and I wanted to turn around. I wanted to go away, but I just kept going closer, like there was something there that I needed to get, like I *had* to get closer, and I don't even know *why*."

He didn't know what she was thinking at the moment, if she even knew what he was talking about. At this point, he was just trying to stay in the moment, gripping onto the mattress and staring at the wall to avoid closing his eyes and seeing the wall in front of him. Seeing the *glass* in front of him.

"And Nancy yelled at me to stop and come back, and I was about to turn around, but then... then I touched the glass. I fucking touched the glass and something happened and it *exploded* and... and I was on *fire*. Every part of me was *on fire* and I couldn't breathe or think or even scream. I couldn't even *fucking scream*. I... It was so hot, El. I thought I was dead. I thought I was fucking dead and I was too hot for too long and the shards of glass had hit me and I was bleeding and burning... and then I blacked out and... and next thing I know I'm in the hospital and Nancy's crying, and my Mom's there and she's crying, too, and all I could think about was how it was *my fault*. I shouldn't have touched the fucking glass..."

He stopped talking, biting back another sob. He couldn't talk anymore, if he opened his mouth, he didn't know if he could actually

say anything else. He was still shaking, and grabbing onto the mattress, and he didn't dare look at El, to see what she thought, how she might react, what she must think of him...

And in an instant, El leaned over and hugged him.

He froze for a second, feeling her arms wrapped tightly around him. He didn't think they'd hugged before.

And very quietly, she said, "That's really fucked up."

That was when Mike broke.

He wrapped his arms around El as he started to weep. He gripped onto the fabric of her dress and buried his head in her shoulder, his entire body shaking as he cried. She jumped a little, but she hugged him tighter, letting him release all his pent-up sadness and anger and guilt and fear into his sobs. She hugged him for what felt like hours but couldn't have been more than mere minutes, and Mike cried until he couldn't cry anymore, and then they just hugged until he finally let go.

"S-sorry." he said numbly.

"It's okay." El replied.

They were silent for a few more moments, and then Mike said, "S-so, you want to... talk about anything?"

She shook her head, and they sat in silence for a little bit longer, staring up at the lights on the ceiling until their friends woke up.

Nancy was spending the night in Hopper's apartment, and she was *not* happy about it.

The three teens had been allowed to set up in the living room. The whole day, Joyce had been "watching them"- as if they were infants- while Hopper went out, and he came back with some blueprints of the Lab he'd swiped from the Police Station. They mapped out all the exits and entrances and where the cameras were supposed to be and

how to get in and out, but they made the teens sit in another room for that. Not that that mattered; Nancy had a glass cup and a lot of motivation to eavesdrop, and she was able to relay the adults' information to the other teens.

But Hopper said they were going to be working all night, and so the teens were sleeping in the Living Room. It was around then that Steve and Jonathan pulled her into the far corner and informed her that Hopper also had powers.

"Is everybody in this damn town powered?" Nancy asked, trying to bring light to the situation.

"I sure hope not." Steve said. "My Dad with magic abilities would be a fucking nightmare."

"Same here." Jonathan added.

They were all sitting down, curling up into the farthest area from the other room, and Jonathan had his arms resting on his knees in a way that was oddly cute, while Steve kept running his hands through his hair, like he did whenever he was nervous. They were all trying to keep their voices down so they weren't overheard, but that was hard to do while they were all so worried- they'd just spent the last several days under quite a lot of stress.

"And... do they know what I'm not telling them?" Nancy asked cautiously, shooting a furtive glance at the door.

The boys both shook their heads. "They probably suspect, but I don't know if they actually believe... anyway, they think we don't know, either." Steve said.

Jonathan seemed to be hesitating, glancing at the ground. Finally, he said, "I don't like lying to my Mom."

"Jonathan-" Nancy began.

"I won't tell her!" Jonathan said quickly. "Of course not. It's not my secret to tell. But... it's just weird. The only thing I ever kept from her was my and Will's powers, and that was cause I thought that if we get caught, she might get in trouble, or..."

“Don’t worry about it.” Nancy sighed, and then she smirked a little. “Steve and I have more experience lying to parents, we can give you a class.”

They all laughed a little at that. Then, Steve glanced at the door and said, “Should we tell them? Like, at any point? It might be relevant information.”

Nancy shook her head. “If they don’t know already, I’m not telling them.”

“But you told us.” Jonathan said.

“That’s because I dragged you two into this.” Nancy said. “I made you hide me, Jonathan, and made you drive me on a wild goose-chase, Steve. You needed to know what you got into. They got involved on their own.”

“You didn’t make us do anything.” Steve said instantly. “We wanted to help you.”

Jonathan nodded in agreement.

Nancy gave them a smile, and then sighed. “I hope Mike’s okay. He doesn’t do well with stress.”

She paused, and then added, “He doesn’t do too well with his powers, either.”

23. Mornings are for Coffee and Exposition

Notes for the Chapter:

HEEEEEEEEEEEEEEY I'M BACK EARLY

And I'm glad bc shit's hitting the fan VERY soon...

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mornings are for Coffee and Exposition

Nancy woke up on the couch, and she kept her eyes shut for several minutes, trying to contain herself. She had to stay calm today. No matter what Hopper said, she was going to help. She was going to shut down the Lab. For Barb. For...

Every time she thought about what had happened, she felt sick. Barb was gone, and it was her fucking fault. Her best friend wasn't going to help her with homework again, or laugh about the dumb boys in their class, or text her random *Doctor Who* memes while she was trying to sleep, or gush about how excited she was for college, not ever again. And it was all because of what she could do. And because of those people at the Lab. They couldn't have her, so they shot her.

She remembered the day Barb had shown her her powers. She'd been really nervous, but they'd gone to the river in the woods, and Barb had moved the water around her in a spiral.

"I think it's genetic." she'd said quietly, smiling a little at Nancy's astonishment. "It's pretty cool."

"It's *bitchin!*" Nancy had said.

Bitchin.

Nancy shut her eyes some more, clenching her fists. She couldn't think about that now. She had to think about her mission. Avenge Barb first, grieve her later. Easier said than done, but maybe if she

got up, she'd be able to focus on something else. She knew that Mike coped the same way; they needed a distraction, a task to do. They just needed to focus on something else, and then she couldn't focus on Barb, and he couldn't focus on the accident.

She stood up, throwing her sweatshirt on over her outfit- the same one she'd worn the last few days- and wandered into the kitchen, stepping over Jonathan and Steve, who were still asleep on the floor. As she rubbed her eyes and pushed the creaking door open, she heard another sound from the kitchen. She stopped, freezing in her place, hearing what seemed to be the tail-end of a conversation.

"I locked it up while doing the routine check last night." Joyce was saying. "But I don't think anybody from the Lab would find it. But before we go, I want to go see if the kids are hiding there. It's the only place I haven't checked- well, I haven't checked the Arcade, but the vans are still parked out there. I think they raided the place."

"Yeah. Apparently the girl did quite some shit to them." Hopper replied, his voice low.

"I thought I saw burns on the walls. Do you think anybody else was there?"

"If there was, the kids didn't mention them."

There was silence for a second, and then Joyce said, "Hop, I know you don't want to do this. But if we just let them continue, that Lab is going to keep kidnapping children. If what they said about El's childhood is true- and if we're right about that other girl's death- then those children are in horrible danger. They're torturing them, Hop. And my son's in there now..."

Hopper interrupted, "I know, Joyce. I know. And I'll help. But once that Lab is gone, I'm done. You know what happened last time-"

"You don't need to fucking remind me, Hop." Nancy jumped; she'd never heard Ms. Byers so much as utter a "heck" before, so hearing her cuss the Chief out was a bit of a shock. "I'm well aware of what happened, and why we stopped. But I'm willing to move past it if it means protecting those kids."

After another long pause, Nancy heard a chair push back, and Joyce said, “I’m going out to look for them. I’ll be back before we go out. Call me if anything happens.”

“Of course.”

Nancy waited against the wall for a few more minutes, trying to quiet her breathing. She didn’t want her eavesdropping to be too obvious, and to be honest, she was still trying to process what she’d heard. What had made Hopper and Joyce stop superhero-ing? And when were they vigilantes? Nancy couldn’t remember hearing anything about powered people before her own generation...

Finally, she pushed her way into the room, rubbing her eyes again to make it look like she’d just woken up. Hopper was sitting at the table, a coffee cup in hand. “How’d you sleep?” he asked, staring down at a newspaper in front of him.

“As well as expected.” Nancy shrugged, glancing around and finally finding the coffee maker. As she grabbed a cup off of the counter and placed it underneath the dispenser, she asked, “Where’s Ms. Byers?”

“Went out.”

Nothing else was said until Nancy’s coffee was done, and then she moved to sit at the table, across from the Chief. She waited for a second, and then asked, “So, what are we doing about the Lab?”

Hopper paused. “Joyce and I going in. I’m going in pretending to have heard complaints, and she’ll follow me in her camouflaged form. She’s going to break into their shit and find incriminating files, and then find Will and get him out, too.”

“Can she make him invisible, too?” Nancy asked curiously.

“If she’s touching him.” Hopper said. “Anyway, we’ll be in and out in less than an hour, and then we’ll bring Will and you kids somewhere safe. Then we’ll track down the other children, and hide you guys until we can release all the incriminating files.”

“I want to help.” Nancy said.

“Nancy-”

“They killed my best friend.” she glared up at him. “I want to make them pay. I might not be able to turn myself invisible, but I can handle weapons pretty well- trust me, I can fight way better than you’d think. You need a sharpshooter? I can be your distraction-”

“Nancy, you’re sixteen.” Hopper raised his voice, cutting her off. “It’s too dangerous for you to go.”

Nancy gave him a death glare, and then said, “How old were you when you and Ms. Byers were running around being heroes?”

Before he could even think to respond, she stood up, leaving her coffee behind, and left the room.

“What are your friends like?”

Kali seemed to jump before responding. “What?”

Will had spent all of yesterday talking about his friends and his life; ranting had been good for him, it had kept him pretty distracted. Kali has listened and asked questions, and he’d snuck her some more food from the kitchens. He decided to limit his trips to once a day, to minimize the possibility of an accident while he traveled by shadow. But, as he woke up that morning, he realized that she hadn’t told him anything.

“Your friends. You said that you were sending your sister to your friends when you got caught. What are they like?”

Kali didn’t answer for a second, and Will wondered if he’d crossed a line. Finally, she said, “Their names are Axel, Mick, Funshine and Dottie. Dottie’s our newest, they tried to lock her up for beating the shit out of an asshole who deserved it.”

“Are they... our siblings?” Will asked. He liked referring to other powered people as family. It made him feel like he was a part of something, something good.

“No. No, but they’re all outcasts like us. Axel actually found me, after I ran away from... a place. We learned how to navigate the streets together, and the others came later.”

“How long have you been out?”

Kali sighed. “A long while. I thought I’d never be back here, but when I realized that Eleven was inside...”

“How’d you find out?”

“I saw the Lab while we were going through the woods. We picked up on their radio signals and heard them talking about her. She’s the only sibling I know who...”

Who survived.

“I was supposed to go in and get her out. The others were waiting in an abandoned building, and we were going to leave town. I hope Eleven found them, but there’s no way to know. I didn’t even give her directions, but I didn’t want anyone hearing...” she sighed.

Will hesitated, before asking, “What can Eleven do?”

“Telekinesis, at least I assume. They only let me see it a couple of times.” Kali said. “But I’ve seen her make things float. And she broke the window and floated herself out. Hopefully she’ll be able to keep bad people away with her power. She’s a fighter.”

There was silence for a while, and then Will said, “Kal, I... I want to be a fighter. I want to get out of here.”

Kali hesitated, and then said, “You’re going to need a plan. You’re going to want to jump out of a low-story window- first if you can, otherwise you’ll need to waste energy getting yourself a slide or ladder out of your powers. You’re going to need that to get over the fence- it’s electrocuted.”

“I-I know.” Will said. “If I have something white, I can summon an ice wall to climb. Grey’s metal, Green is plants, Purple’s wind... I might even be able to shadow-travel over it, but I’ve never tried to go over an electrical fence like that it might not work.”

“Then scratch that. Take no chances that you can’t take back. That’s for when you’re far away from here.” Kali’s voice was suddenly very orderly, very controlled. Will wondered how often she’d taken charge before; she was quite the natural. “I saw you suck white out of the floor when you first got here. Can you do that again?”

“Probably.”

“Could the ice last you all the way to the fence?”

“Definitely.”

“Then suck some of the floor, smash the window and jump out, and then get over the fence. You will definitely be chased, so you’ll have to move fast. Do you know your way around the forest?”

“Kinda.”

“Do you at least know what direction you’re going?”

“Towards town? Yes.”

“Then go there, but be prepared for a fight.”

“Once I’m in the forest, and I run out of ice,” Will said, “I can grab onto anything green or brown. That’ll give me control over plants or rocks and dirt, and those tend to be the most powerful. Problem is, they’re tiring as hell.”

“In that case, you’re going to want to use the dirt or plants to block them off with a wall, instead of a fight. Then you just need to run as far as you can and find a safe place to rest- inside a bush or a hollow tree. If you get into town and your safe spots have been compromised-”

“They won’t.”

“-my Gang is on the edge of town, look for the abandoned building with a moon sign. Walk in and don’t waste time, just tell them you’re with Kali. They can get you to a safe place.”

“Wait...” Will said, suddenly realizing something. “What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me.” Kali’s voice lowered slightly. “I’ll be fine. I’ve survived this place before, I can survive it again.”

“You shouldn’t have to.” Will said quietly. He took a second, steeling himself, and then said, “I’m not going without you.”

“That’s not an option. I’m locked up, if you didn’t notice. It’ll take more energy to get me out than you, and having more than one person could get you caught faster.”

“I’m not leaving you.”

“You *have to*.”

Will took a deep breath, and then said, “No, I don’t.”

“Will? Will, what are you-”

Will immediately started crawling away. He didn’t care if Kali thought she couldn’t be saved. She *was*. And he was going to get her out.

24. Mike is stubborn as hell

Notes for the Chapter:

Once again, disclaimer: This chapter deals heavily with and references past panic attacks and PTSD. I'm doing my best to represent them in a respectful and accurate manor, and I would will change the chapter if I accidentally offend anyone or inaccurately describe something.

Thanks!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Mike is stubborn as hell

Mixed Feelings was something that Mike experienced a lot. He had mixed feelings on Math, for example- sometimes solving problems was fun, he liked the challenge, but he hated doing the homework. He had mixed feelings on the new *Star Wars* movie; but then again, who didn't?

But saying that he had mixed feelings on his powers was a bit of an understatement.

He didn't remember much about when he first found them, but he recalled something almost falling on him, and he'd reached out his hands and summoned a forcefield around himself. He had been fascinated for a good split second, before he realized where the powers must have come from, and then the warmth in his fingers turned the rest of his blood cold, and the sound of the glass shattering pounded in his ears until he dropped to the ground. Nancy had run in after a while and managed to calm him down, and he begged her not to tell their parents. If they knew he was having flashbacks and panic attacks, his Mom would worry too much and wouldn't let him go anywhere and he'd never leave her sight again, and his Dad would just tell him to toughen up, if he said anything at

all. And Mike didn't want to deal with that. He remembered sobbing on the ground, pleading with Nancy to keep quiet.

"Alright." she'd finally said. "Okay. I won't tell anyone. Okay. Don't freak out, you're safe here. You're safe."

He thought about his powers, though. He'd puzzled over them for days, sketching forcefields onto the edge of his homework and looking up scraps of information any powered kids that had been discovered to see if anybody had similar abilities.

About three weeks later, he'd decided to test again. It took a while, but eventually he managed to summon a small bubble around himself. And almost instantly, the terror and dread set in again, and he'd ended up crying in the middle of the school field until Will found him, having been running that way to chase his dog. He told Will that he'd heard someone's glass break and that was why he was panicking; it was something that had happened once while the two of them had been walking home from school, and it was easier than telling him what had actually happened.

He'd figured out then that his powers were a trigger, and that wasn't exactly a great thought, especially since his powers seemed to be incredibly useful. He didn't dare try again, though he did it by accident once when he was eleven, after he'd been putting a book away in the Library and the shelf had collapsed and he tried to protect himself. That was when he knew for certain what his powers did to him.

His parents found out about his flashbacks a few months before then; While he was hanging out with Lucas, Ms. Sinclair had accidentally dropped a glass, and once it hit the ground, Mike had started screaming. Mr. Sinclair had sat him and his parents down and explained the possibility of Mike having PTSD- apparently he was familiar with it from his days in the army. Of course, his parents had reacted exactly how he expected them to- his Dad asked how Mike could "get over" it, and his Mom immediately started fussing and grabbing his shoulders and only barely kept herself from crying.

"We thought this whole business was over." Mike overheard her saying that night. "I thought we wouldn't have to deal with this

‘accident’ ever again.”

Why did he have to drag them back to it? They’d done well, not talking about the incident with the explosion since it happened. The only time he’d tried bringing it up to Karen, she’d gotten sad and told him to stop talking and unpack his boxes. They’d just moved from one apartment building to another, and Mike suspected that it was to get them farther away from the place the explosion had happened, but his parents never said. Not like he expected them to.

His parents let him see a therapist for a few months, but Mike didn’t like talking about his feelings, and after a while, Karen decided to put him “on a break” for a while, which meant he didn’t go back again. Nancy went for a bit, too, but she wasn’t having as much trouble as Mike in re-adjusting to life; she found the incident more confusing than terrifying, and had the mentality that it was over now, and the guy who did this to us was punished, so why bother?

And she hadn’t received powers from the incident, either. Mike knew that for certain. One day, they’d been watching the news and saw a report on how some scientists had determined that powers were a danger to the children who wielded them, that they were slowly killing themselves. Mike had shut the TV off, not wanting to think about it. And then he’d asked, “Nancy, do you think we... we *could* get powers?”

“Of course not.” she’d said quickly. “They said on TV it’s a genetic anomaly, and we would’ve known by now.”

He was pretty sure his powers weren’t genetic. They were from the Accident. He wondered for a bit why he got them and Nancy didn’t, but he eventually decided it was their proximity. He was closest to the blast. She was only just off the staircase. The shards hadn’t even hit her. She was the one who’d saved them, running out into the rain to find someone to get her brother out. If she hadn’t done that, Mike would be dead. He’d be *dead*.

Regardless, it meant that Nancy didn’t know powers could come from something other than genes. And that meant she didn’t have any. Right?

The TV stories weren't just reaching him and Nancy. His parents would watch the news with a vague interest, and Mike couldn't turn the TV off if they were paying attention. His Dad thought the powered kids were arrogant teens. His Mom thought they were sad, dying kids. They never thought that maybe they didn't want powers, that maybe it wasn't their fault, that maybe they weren't slowly being killed by their abilities.

At least, Mike had thought he wasn't dying. He might be, his forcefields might be sucking his energy and happiness and interest in things he used to like. But he'd only used them three times before El came, and those things had happened anyway. So, either keeping them inside would do nothing- in which case, why *not* use them to stop a robbery?- or the scientists were wrong- maybe on purpose to keep people in fear, maybe on accident due to faulty or biased research. But it wasn't like arguing with his parents about it was going to change anything. Even though now he knew it definitely wasn't true- Lucas, Dustin, Max and El all seemed to be as healthy as expected, their powers didn't drain anything- he still wondered sometimes. Maybe if he couldn't use his forcefields, he'd feel better about himself.

Or maybe, if he could use his forcefields, he could use them to save his friends. And maybe that would help him get better.

There was only one way to know.

"Still not working." Lucas observed as Dustin flopped onto the mattress.

"No shit, Sherlock." Dustin groaned. "If we don't get out of here, we can't help Will."

"We'll try again in an hour. And we're not electrocuting anything!" Lucas said sternly.

Mike and El glanced at each other; they were sitting and leaning against the bookshelf. Mike had some kind of resolve in his eyes, something that he knew El wouldn't know about. He hadn't told her

yet- Lucas had woken up before he could- but he had an idea. He just had to say it, if he could bring himself to.

“What the hell are we supposed to do?” Max asked; she was sitting against the wall, a bored look in her eyes. “Dustin’s the only one who understands the computer and it doesn’t even have any games on it, my phone’s battery is dying-”

“I can fix that.” Dustin offered.

“We could all play *Mafia*.” Lucas offered.

“We’re not gonna play *Mafia* and let you win again!” Dustin huffed.

“Okay, I’ll play the Narrator.”

“You’ll still win!”

“The Narrator’s not part of the game-”

“You’ll find a way!”

Mike interrupted, spitting out as fast as he could, “I want to try to use my powers again.”

There was a heavy silence as everyone turned to stare at him. He bit his lip and forced himself to stare back.

“There’s no way we’re letting you do that.” Lucas said softly.

“You’re not *letting* me do anything.” Mike said. “I want to.”

“Mike, you had a fucking panic attack.” Max sharply said. “Do you really want to do that again?”

“No, I want to *stop* it.” Mike said.

“*Stop* it?”

“I don’t want to be panicking while everyone else is fighting. I want to protect you guys, and these forcefields... they can help.”

Dustin said, “Mike, really, it’s okay. Just because you can’t use your

powers doesn't mean you're useless."

"Yeah, you still have the flashlight? You could probably kill someone with that." Max said, trying and failing to lighten the conversation.

Mike gave them all death glares, and was about to say something, when El said, quietly, "I'll help."

They all turned around to stare at her, and she repeated, "I'll help."

"El, you saw what happened." Lucas said, his voice getting even softer. "If he summons his forcefield, he'll freak out."

"He wants to stop." El narrowed her eyes, saying her words with a deep determination. "I'll help. Friends help each other."

"We can help him by helping him not do a stupid impulsive thing." Max said.

"Listen, I'm going to fucking *try*." Mike said sharply. "I'm gonna try to use my own fucking powers, so you can either help me, or... I'll do it myself."

The other kids' eyes widened in shock. Lucas finally said, "You wouldn't. You wouldn't do it alone."

"Fucking watch me."

There was silence for a good five minutes, and then Mike said, "I'm going into the testing room. Does anybody want to go with me?"

He slowly stood up, with El jumping up next to him. Mike looked at the others, who were glancing to each other quite worriedly. Finally, Lucas said, "You two go into the testing room. We'll wait out here, but we'll be *right here* if *anything* happens. If you get even a little anxious, I want you back out here."

"Geez, Dad, I'll be fine." Mike rolled his eyes.

He walked over towards the testing room, and froze right in front of the area that would open up for him.

Shit. Come on.

If he couldn't even get past the fucking glass wall, how was he supposed to use his own fucking powers?

He felt fingers wrap around his hand, and he glanced over to see El next to him, an understanding look in her eyes. She then turned and tapped the glass herself, gripping his hand as he flinched, and led him through the open doorway and into the room.

Max was right. It *was* cold. Maybe that would be better. The accident was ungodly hot, maybe the cold would help.

El must have noticed he was thinking about the incident- he must have looked nervous- because she grabbed both of his hands, and said, "It's okay."

Mike took a deep breath, gave her hands a quick squeeze, and slowly lifted one arm above their heads.

"Start small!" Mike jumped as he heard Max call out. He turned to see her and the other boys standing on the other side. Once she knew she had his attention, she said, "Don't do it super big, dude. Try a smaller field, then go from there."

"I- I've never..." Well, granted, he'd only used his forcefields four times, to horrible effect. He might be able to make a smaller field. Maybe if he just focused on his hand, just protecting his hand...

"And El," Lucas added, earning him a glare from Mike, "If Mike starts freaking out, remember what we did. You've gotta ground him. Get him to focus on something in front of him." El gave him a quick nod.

"And if you get too panicky, you can stop!" Dustin shouted. "Whenever you want!"

"Okay!" Mike yelled, and then he turned back to El. He lifted his free hand, and focused on it. He needed to summon protection around the hand. Slowly... slowly...

A few wisps of what looked like white light floated out of his fingers, twirling around in a circular formation, shining under the light of the

practice room. Mike held them above his warm hands for a good few seconds before the rest of his body started to get colder, and he instantly clenched his fists, letting the strands dissipate.

“Are you okay?” Dustin called. Mike bit back a groan; it had been an instinctual reaction, one he couldn’t have if he wanted to get better.

“I’m fine.” he called back. “Just gonna... try again.”

He took another breath, gave El’s hand another squeeze, and open his hand once again.

The strands shot out faster this time, and he thought there might be more of them. They still went in a circle around his hand, and he managed to keep his focus on them for about five seconds, before he went cold again. He narrowed his eyes and slowed his breathing, trying to still focus on the light, not on what was happening in his head.

It’s in my head. He said to himself. *It’s in my head.*

He tried to remember what he used to do with the therapist before he’d stopped visiting. He’d said trying to change his feelings on potential triggers was the best option. So he had to associate his forcefield with something positive. Well, that was much easier said than done. Still, if he could try and think about *protecting your friends* while summoning, maybe that would help...

The circle expanded, just slightly, and suddenly he was feeling *too* cold and *too* hot once again. No, no, he could do this, he could do this, he could do this...

He heard Nancy’s scream, and he dropped the field.

He had to grab onto El’s shoulders, grasping onto her sleeves to try and ground himself, struggling to hear everybody else’s shouts over the noises in his head. He didn’t hear the other sound, not yet, and he’d like to keep it that way. He then heard El start to speak, too, very faintly.

“Look at me. Look at me. Look at me.”

He was moved his head, staring back at her, though he wanted to look everywhere else, to take in everything he could about the room around him to remind himself that he was still there. She reached up her hands to grab his face, forcing him to look in one place, and repeated, “Look at me. Look at me.”

He stared at her, felt her hands on her face, and slowly released the fabric of her dress. He wasn’t feeling as warm, he wasn’t hearing the screaming, but he wasn’t feeling alright. There was still that dread, that sense of terror.

“I can’t do this.” he said quietly, his voice shaking. “I can’t fucking do this.”

“Mike!” Lucas called from the other side of the glass. His voice sounded scared. “Mike, stop. Get out of there.”

“I can’t...” Mike said again.

“Okay.” El said. “It’s okay. It’s okay. We can go.”

Mike shook a little, as she started to lead him out of the room. He stopped dead in his tracks, though, upon seeing the glass wall again. “It’s okay.” El repeated. “It’s okay-”

Mike glanced between her and the wall, trying to steady himself. After a second, he shut his eyes, and held out his hand again, focusing on the summoning energy. Maybe if he couldn’t see it...

“Holy shit, wait a second!” Dustin’s voice rang in his ears, and Mike dropped his hand, whipping around to look towards him.

Dustin was looking up at the ceiling, and after a second, Mike heard a low rumble.

“That sounds like the trap-floor.” Lucas said confusedly. “Is it working again?”

“Uh, wouldn’t that mean that somebody is coming *down*?” Max asked.

They all stared at each other in horror, and then Lucas said, “You two

stay in there! We'll deal with this."

"What's going on? Who's coming down?" Max glanced between the boys next to her, who were running off to surround the mattress.

"We don't know, but stay calm." Lucas said, holding out his hands, prepared to fight if need be. "We'll protect you."

El started to move towards the wall of the glass door, prepared to help. While Mike took a step back, almost involuntarily, Lucas turned to El, yelling for her to stop. As El skidded to a halt, barely missing the glass, Mike started rushing backwards, stumbling over his own feet as he picked up speed, going farther from the wall, farther from the glass. He stopped, however, once he saw El start walking backwards, too. Lucas was telling her to stay there, to stay safe.

El had to stay safe. She had to stay *safe*.

Mike rushed forwards, grabbing El's arm and dragging her back behind him, throwing his other arm into the air in preparation as she let out a surprised gasp. He didn't care what happened to him if something dangerous dropped down, if it charged at the glass and shattered it in front of him, he had to protect her.

Finally, someone fell into the room. And they all froze in complete and utter confusion when Joyce Byers looked up at them.

There was silence for a good minute, before Joyce, who was just as bewildered, looked around and asked, "What the hell is going on?"

25. A Brief Change of Plans

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

A Brief Change of Plans

“Uh, hi, Ms. Byers.”

Dustin waved at Joyce, who simply stared at them, and then glanced around the room. “What is this? What are you guys doing?”

“Uh...” they glanced to each other. Dustin felt like this was somehow worse than if they’d been attacked. “We’re kinda... just...”

“We came here to...” Lucas said awkwardly.

“Cry.” Dustin finished.

After another second, Max said, “We’re kinda superheroes.”

Joyce shut her eyes, took a few deep breaths in the awkward pause that followed, and then said, “And why is Mike in another room with a new girl?”

“That’s El.” Dustin introduced, pointing towards her. “She’s powered, too.”

They turned to look; Mike was still in front of her, but he’d relaxed a little, glancing between Joyce and the other kids. El was simply glaring at her, sizing her up, trying to figure out if she was a threat. It was a look Dustin knew too well; him and Lucas had used it multiple times while going through the streets, glaring down at people who were making suspicious movements, who were getting too close to them or to Will, who had weapons with them or looked ready to punch somebody in the face. And he assumed that El had to analyze people a lot, seeing as she’d come from a place where... Dustin wasn’t entirely sure *what* happened to her there, but it was certainly not good.

“You guys can come out now!” Max called. “You’re *fine!*”

Mike hesitated, and then grabbed onto El’s hand, and the two of them walked towards the wall. El tapped the door open, and Mike quickly led her out.

Joyce gave El a quick look, and then said, quietly, “You kids are the ones running around town, aren’t you?”

They glanced at each other, and then Lucas said, “It’s me, Dustin and Will. The others have nothing to do with it.”

“You...” Dustin hesitated, feeling his heart quicken, “You won’t tell anybody, will you? Like the Police? Or my Mom?”

“That depends.” Joyce slowly stood up, still glancing around the room. She walked over to the bookshelf, her finger tracing the spines of the books. “Exactly what are you planning?”

“Planning?” Lucas said. “Nothing. We’re planning... on doing nothing.”

“But crying.”

“Shut the *f-*” Lucas had to take a second to calm himself down. “Please stop talking, Dustin.”

“You don’t need to censor yourself, Lucas.” Joyce said quickly. “I’ve heard you guys when you play video games with Will.”

She seemed to be taking this a little too well; Dustin knew that *his* Mom would have a heart attack if she found out he was running around fighting crime every now and again, and Joyce was already under quite a bit of stress.

“So, are you going to tell me what you’re *actually* doing, or do I have to guess?” Joyce glanced back to them.

Dustin turned to Lucas, who turned to Max, who turned to Mike and El. Mike was breathing a little heavily, obviously still trying to calm himself. However, after a second, he said, “We... we’re going to get Will.”

“Dustin can knock out the cameras.” Max added quickly. “And Lucas and I are going in for Will and El’s sister.”

“Eight.” El spoke up, still glaring at Joyce.

Dustin finally turned to El, saying, “El, you don’t have to worry. This is Ms. Byers, she’s Will’s Mom.”

“Mom?” El narrowed her eyes. After a second, she said, “Family?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dustin nodded. “You can trust her. She won’t hurt you.”

Joyce paused at that, and then turned to face El. She has some kind of sympathy in her eyes, and she slowly walked forwards. El flinched and grabbed onto Mike, who looked like he wanted to be anywhere but there at the moment. Joyce then reached out her hand, and El looked at it, bewildered.

“It’s nice to meet you.” she said.

El glanced to Mike, and then released his hand, using hers to grab onto Joyce’s arm. Joyce awkwardly shook it.

After a second, Lucas said, “You aren’t gonna tell the Chief, are you? We didn’t mention... the whole... ‘powered’ thing to him. Except for El.”

“He might’ve figured out Will, too. We didn’t say anything but why else would the Lab take him?” Max added, glancing down at the ground.

“I won’t tell Hopper, but I do suggest that you do. He’ll be more help than you’d think.” Joyce said.

“It’ll compromise his job.” Lucas said.

Joyce snorted, but then said, “Listen, kids, I can’t very well let you go to the Lab. This isn’t your fight-”

“Will’s in trouble. And so are a bunch of other kids. That *makes* it our fight.” Lucas said quickly.

“And you’re not stopping us.” Dustin added. “We’ll set the trap-floor on fire if we have to!”

“Dustin, *shut it!*” Lucas yelled.

Joyce glanced between them all, crossing her arms. Then, she said, “I’d prefer if you stayed here. Hopper and I are going in around... ten o’clock, so I’d say around midnight you should expect us to get Will out- and Eight, if we can find her. We’ll hide them here, I doubt anyone unexpected could get in.”

“*You did.*” Mike said carefully.

“And then you all can wait here for Hop to sort things out.” Joyce shrugged. “But whatever you do, don’t go into town if you can help it. There’s men everywhere who are looking for you, and it’s not for anything good. And, El,” she turned to the girl, her gaze softening a little, “If they try to take you again, you do whatever you can to them. Don’t let them take your freedom again.”

El bit her lip and nodded solemnly.

“You’re not going back there.” she said sternly. She turned back to the kids and said, “I’ve got to check in with Hop, or he’ll get worried... How do I get out of here?”

“Uh, j-jump on the mattress.” Lucas said. “It’ll suck you up... if the trap-floor is working.”

“Good to know.”

“Uh, Ms. Byers?” Mike asked, and she turned to him, concern sparking in her eyes; she must have finally noticed how tense he looked. “Wh... what happens if we *do* get found? Or... run into those guys in some other, non-’rescue attempt’ circumstance?”

Joyce looked at him very seriously, and said, “If you get found, all manners are out the window. Burn them, bite them, throw them out the window, use anything from the weapons wall. Do *not* let them take you.”

The boys looked at each other in something akin to horror. Was Ms.

Byers advising them to *kill*? After a second, Lucas's eyes widened, and he slowly turned to Joyce as she stepped back onto the mattress.

"Ms. Byers..." he said, very slowly, "Have you met these people before?"

She didn't look at them, instead staring up at the ceiling. And then she said, "In a way."

And then she jumped, and disappeared into the tunnel.

They stared after her for a second, and then Max said, "What the *fuck* just happened?"

Lucas walked over to Mike, grabbing onto his shoulder and giving him a quick questioning look, worry evident all over his face. Mike nodded at him, forcing a smile, as El wandered onto the mattress, glancing up as if she could follow Joyce with her eyes.

"What *happened*? Did Will's Mom just indirectly tell us she's involved in this shit?" Max stormed over to Lucas, as if he had any answers.

As she passed, Dustin wandered over to the bookshelf, following the path Joyce had taken, scanning the books on the shelves. Something was off.

"I don't know, but at least the trap-flor is working. And she gave us a time to attack the Lab; if they're going in at 10:00, we can get in, too." Lucas said.

"How are she and the Chief supposed to find Will in that place?" Mike said. "Do they think they're just gonna give him up?"

"That's why we should go in. We'll wait for a bit after they enter, and then run in, get Will out, and leave." Lucas said.

"I could probably get the Chief and Ms. Byers out, too." Max added, as Dustin reached the end of the shelf, reaching in towards the books. "If I get close enough to touch them-"

"If we find Eight," El interrupted, "We won't have to run. She can hide us."

“Hide us?” Lucas asked.

“With magic.”

Before anybody could say anything else, Dustin yelled, “Son of a bitch!”

They all whipped around to stare at him, and he said, “She took our *Heathers* VHS! Son of a bitch!”

“Why would she do that? You must’ve put it somewhere else.” Lucas rolled his eyes.

“It’s not here! She stole it while we weren’t looking!” Dustin huffed. “Okay, that’s it. After we get Will, we’re breaking into his house and getting it back!”

“You know you can get it on DVD?” Max said, her and Mike sharing a quick incredulous glance. “Or on the internet?”

“It’s a matter of *principle!*”

Joyce reached the top of Castle Byers. She glanced around the Cabin, took a deep breath, and screamed into her hands.

Once she was done, she picked up her phone and texted Hopper. *Kids are safe. They're in our place.*

At least, she hoped to God they’d be safe. But she knew they were *definitely* not going to stay in the Castle. They were too stubborn and wild for their own good, and they were definitely going to find Will. If they were going into the Lab, she wasn’t going to need a distraction.

However, *they* would need a distraction if they were going in. And she could very easily cause some chaos while invisible. If anybody could get Will and Eight out, she figured that three-to-five heroes would have a much better shot than one. But at the same time, she had to make sure nothing happened to those kids.

So she checked her pocket for the VHS copy of *Heathers* - how'd she miss *that* while cleaning up the Hideout? She wouldn't want one of the parents to yell at her for the words those kids learned from that film- and ran into the woods.

Will took a deep breath. He clenched his fists, steeling himself, and then he kicked the opening of the vent as hard as he could. He kicked, and kicked, and kicked until it came loose, crashing onto the ground. It was loud, and he knew it, but that was fine.

He'd taken three rights and a left. So he needed to take three lefts and a right to get back to Kali's room. He knew she'd probably be guarded. He could deal with that.

Will leapt onto the floor, reaching out his hand to touch it. The white from the tiles sucked into his skin, turning it a porcelain color. He had to blink his eyes real quick to readjust to the sudden light, and then he had to start running. He didn't even wait for the entire floor to lose its color before he took off. They'd see him on the cameras, so he had to run fast if he wanted to get Kali and get out of there.

He rushed down the halls, letting some small snowflakes erupt from his fingers. Just enough to give him chills, keep him going, wake his limbs up. He had to be ready, ready to fight.

He turned the corner, to the place where Kali would be. As he suspected, two uniformed men were standing outside, with guns, which they pointed at him as they shouted.

Wouldn't be a problem.

With a determination he'd never felt before, he lifted his arms, blocking their path to him with a wall of ice. As they froze, he shut his eyes, and the ice split, flying at the guards. They were knocked against the wall. Will cautiously approached them, shut his eyes, and hit them with ice again.

If they weren't knocked out before, they were now.

Will ran to the door, pounding on it as hard as he could. "Kal! Kal,

I'm coming in!"

"Will?" he heard her voice, a lot more muffled than before. "Will, no, get out!"

Instead, Will ran to one of the guards, digging through his pockets. There had to be a key card. He saw a swiper on the wall, he just had to find the card. Then he could get her out.

"Will, run! *Run!*!" Kali was screaming now. "Leave me, just go! Go! GO!"

Will jumped as he heard footsteps behind him. Soldiers were coming, guns drawn. Will shot up another wall of ice and yelled, "Kal, we're gonna have to fight our way out."

"Just go!"

Finally, Will got a keycard, but then froze. He felt... fuzzy. As he glanced down, he realized why. His skin had returned to normal.

As soon as he realized that, his ice wall came crumbling down. "Shit!" He grabbed the floor, letting more white sink into his fingers.

In a flash, though, he felt arms around him, lifting him against the wall. He screamed and kicked, aiming for the crotch of whoever had just lifted him, but instead, he felt something metal slam into his side.

And then he felt a shock course through his veins.

There was a kind of tingling in his side, where the metal had connected. But that didn't worry him. What worried him was his chest, which felt like it was collapsing in on itself. His arms were too heavy, they were too shocked, they felt like they were about to break off. He let out a scream, one that drowned out the sound of Kali's shouts on the other side of the door.

He was thrown against the wall again, and again. His head was pounding, and every part of his body was screaming. The metal was shoved into his side again, he felt another jolt of electricity, and then he blacked out.

26. The Entire Byers Family is unlucky as hell

Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so I've finished writing ahead for now- of course there will be editing, but I've got most of Part I done. I'm not too satisfied with the timeskip that'll happen at the end, but unless I want to expand three chapters into a Part 2/4- which I do NOT want to do- that's a necessary evil.

In related news, I'll be starting writing ahead on Part II, and hopefully I'll be able to get to Part III very soon. So that should be fun...

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The Entire Byers Family is unlucky as hell

Joyce knocked on the door, and Jonathan looked up in surprise. “Can I come in?” she asked.

He glanced around. He was sitting in what he thought might be Hopper’s office, but he didn’t know for sure; he’d really just gone there to get some peace and quiet from Steve and Nancy’s plotting and Hopper and Joyce’s discussions. But he nodded, and she walked up, sitting on the floor besides him.

“Look, we never really got a chance to talk about... things.” she said quietly. “About Will, about your powers, about *my* powers, this whole thing... so, where do you want to start?”

Jonathan paused, staring up at the ceiling, and then he said, “So, you and Hopper... were you like, a thing?”

She didn’t respond for a second, and then she said, “We... uh, we found our powers when we were about your age. We started running around fighting crime- thought we could be comic book legends or some shit.”

“What happened?”

Joyce bit her lip, turning to stare at the ground. Then, she said, “It was about a month before College, and we were approached by a man who said he wanted to help us develop our powers. We almost accepted, but we decided against it. We had a good handle on things, we thought. He said he understood. He didn’t.”

Jonathan turned to her, and she continued. “He must not have had soldiers before, because he didn’t try kidnapping us. But other powered people started disappearing, and all of our contacts just dropped off the face of the Earth, and... people seemed to just want to write them off as if they never existed. Hop and I went to the building that the study was supposed to be in, to confront the people responsible, we figured it *had* to be them. But it was the wrong address, they’d given us the wrong address, and while we were gone, our headquarters exploded.”

She took a shaky breath, and then said, “We came back and everything was gone. And it was our fault. If we’d just let ourselves disappear, or kept him out of it, or took him with us...”

“Him?” Jonathan asked.

“Our...” Joyce shut her eyes tight. “We had another... friend. He wasn’t powered, but he was our computer guy. He was... he was so nice. Loved helping people. *He* was the Superhero. We got back to the headquarters and the surface was destroyed and on fire, and he was there. We think he found out about the attack and tried to stop it. And... and it broke us. He shouldn’t have been there. He should’ve been going to College with us, and taking care of his parents, and... we knew we couldn’t do it anymore. If they wanted us powered people to disappear, we would.”

She took a deep breath and then said, “Enough about me. How long did you know you had powers?”

Well, she clearly didn’t want to talk about whatever had happened anymore. Jonathan could understand the feeling, though he wished he had a bit more information. He shrugged and said, “I was eleven, and you... you and Dad were arguing, and I was looking through my

photos and accidentally pulled out a notebook. I freaked out for a bit, but I thought it was pretty cool. Kept doing it for a few years, on and off, trying to see what I could do, but I didn't show anyone. I couldn't; by the time I even figured out my powers, the people on TV were talking about how we were sick, so I didn't want to worry anyone. So I shut up and kept it quiet. That... that changed when I found Will after he'd... found his own powers.”

He still remembered opening Will's door to ask for a book he'd borrowed, to see him sobbing into his knees and sitting in a puddle of water, his skin just as blue.

“I showed him mine, so that... so that he knew he wasn't alone. And he showed me when he t-transformed for the first time, and told me he'd be okay, not to worry about him running around with his friends... God, I should've told you.”

Joyce said, “Maybe. But I assume Will asked you not to?”

“He didn't want you to worry.”

“Of course he didn't.”

Jonathan felt his heart sink at the thought of his brother, and he asked, “Mom, is Will going to be okay?”

“I'll make sure of it.” she said. “That reminds me, I... I came in to tell you that Hop and I are heading out. If we're not back by One in the morning, I left a red pin in the map on the table. Go there and wait for us.”

Jonathan turned to her. “Will you be okay?”

She gave him a quick smirk. “Jonathan. I'm a superhero. I know exactly what I'm doing. Are you going to be okay here?”

“Y-yeah, I'll have Nancy and Steve.”

Joyce gave him a look, and then said, “Jonathan. I'm getting him back. Trust me.”

“I do, it's just...” Jonathan sighed, and then said, “I should've been

there. If I wasn't so scared of showing off my fucking powers, I could've gone with him, he wouldn't have been alone, I could have kept him from-"

"Jonathan, you couldn't have done anything." Joyce said, turning him slightly to look at her. "They would've just kidnapped you both. It is *not* your fault, it's *theirs*."

They stared at each other for a while, and then she stood up and said, "Tell Nancy to actually stay here. I'd like to be able to keep track of *somebody*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Hmm, tell you when I get back."

Jonathan waited a few minutes before leaving, going to find wherever Nancy and Steve were. He managed to find them in the kitchen, shoving bags of food into Nancy's backpack.

"Uh... what are you guys..." Jonathan said, and they turned to him, guilty looks on their eyes.

"Uh... we're..." Steve turned to Nancy.

Nancy bit her lip and then said, really simply, "We're helping."

"How are we supposed to do that?" Jonathan asked.

"Well, Chief said that they're going to need a distraction." Nancy said. "I know a good distraction."

"You're not turning yourself in!"

"Of course not." Nancy narrowed her eyes. "I'm not that stupid. I've got a better plan than that."

Jonathan's eyes widened. "You don't mean- Nancy, what if Will gets caught in the crossfire?"

"He won't." Nancy said. "We'll start it outside."

"Nancy... if this fails, you know what will happen."

As Jonathan said this, Steve turned to Nancy, too, the same concern in his expression. Nancy took a deep breath and then said, "Then we'll have to succeed, won't we? You... you don't have to come if you..."

"Don't say that." Jonathan shook his head. "Don't say that, I'm coming. For you and for Will."

Nancy and Steve turned to each other, and Steve shrugged. "There's no question about it. I'm not leaving you."

She smirked, and said, "Well, then... let's burn that Lab to the ground."

Will woke up alone and cold.

He couldn't move for a few minutes; he felt like all of his blood had been replaced with lead. He supposed that should have worried him, but his emotions seemed to be coming in slower than the feeling in his limbs.

Slowly, he managed to move his arms and pull himself up. He blinked, trying to adjust to the low light. Where was he? The room was smaller than his closet at home, with no windows and one single air vent that was higher than he could reach. This dark room looked familiar, but he couldn't...

That's when it hit him.

And he let out a scream.

He ran to what he thought might be the door, pounding on it, screeching, "Let me out! Let me out!"

He knew where he recognized this room. It looked just like Kali's.

They'd put him in Solitary.

"*Let me out!*"

He felt tears spring into his eyes. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't be. He'd been so careful, he'd lasted almost a week. They couldn't have caught him. They couldn't have...

He wasn't able to scream anymore. Instead, he crumpled to the ground, curling up on the floor.

"They'd start by breaking you. Probably throw you into solitary like me, starve you until you're too weak to fight back."

The reached to the floor through his sobs, thinking he might be able to suck in the color. It wasn't working. Why wasn't it *working*?

"Then they'd start the testing- making you get to the limits of your powers, measuring your brainwaves, trying to figure out how best to weaponize you."

He looked down and realized what was wrong. He had gloves on his hand, gloves that were stuck on his sleeves. He tried to rip them, tried to tear them off, but it wasn't working. He couldn't use his powers. He couldn't use his *hands*.

"And if you tried to fight back, you go back to solitary, or you get electrocuted, or drugged, or..."

He burst into sobs. There wasn't anything else he could do.

He was *trapped*.

27. The Lab is about to face the full force of Five Angry Pre-Teens

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Lab is about to face the full force of Five Angry Pre-Teens

Mike and El were sitting alone in the corner.

Lucas, Dustin and Max were packing up; apparently there were some medical supplies the boys had hidden in the bookshelf, which Dustin was currently shoving into Mike's now-empty bag, its original contents shoved into another corner. They were now around the supercomputer, with Dustin explaining what was going on. He was pulling up a map of town, pointing out different paths through the forest- which had the most hiding places, which were the fastest route, which were the hardest to trace.

Mike and El simply sat together. Mike had one of the books out, but he couldn't pay attention. El seemed to understand this; she grabbed his hand and asked, "Are you okay?"

He shook his head. "But I'll be fine. Are *you* okay?"

She gave him a bewildered look, and he said, "They're breaking into the... the bad place, and getting your sister out. Are you... nervous?"

She glanced away and nodded.

"I want to help them, but..." he trailed off. "Do... do you want to talk about anything?"

She shook her head.

"Okay. That's okay."

"What are you two whisperin' about?" Mike looked up to see Max standing above them, giving them a glare. He shrugged, and she sat down by them.

"Shouldn't you be planning how to survive?" Mike asked.

"They're just talking routes. I'd rather..." Max sighed, running her hand through her hair. Finally, she said, "Do... do you think your parents are worried about you?"

Mike shrugged. "I dunno. My Mom's probably worried. My Dad's probably just listening to whatever shit the Lab said I did." He paused. "What about your parents? You've been gone two months, haven't you?"

"I haven't seen my Dad in a bit longer." Max confessed. "My Mom flipped after what happened to me, wouldn't let me talk to him. She's probably worried, I guess. I don't care." Something in her voice told Mike that she was lying. "My Stepdad and Stepbrother are probably just pissed. They couldn't give two shits about me."

They all were silent for a minute, with Lucas and Dustin's conversation on the other side of the room breaking the silence. Eventually, El reached over and grabbed Max's hand, saying, "Friend."

Max stared at her in shock for a good long while, and then she giggled, grabbing El's hand back. "Yeah. Friend."

At that point, Lucas looked back towards them. "Max! We've got a route. You ready to go?"

Max slowly let go of El, standing up and nodding. "Yeah."

Lucas and Dustin walked over, and Dustin said, "Now, you two, if anything happens, find us. Stay safe."

"Don't take any risks." Lucas added.

"God, we're not fucking toddlers." Mike rolled his eyes. "What do you think we're gonna do? Run off into the night to attack the center of an anti-powered government Lab? Wait, no, that's *your* job."

"Just stay safe. We'll bring Will and Eight back." Lucas smiled. "See you in a few hours!"

And with that, Max, Lucas and Dustin rushed to the exit, and disappeared.

Mike and El stared after them for a second, and then El said, “Mike?”
“Yeah?”

“I don’t like not helping.”

Mike sighed. “Me neither.”

They sat by themselves for a while. Mike eventually pulled one of the copies of *A Wrinkle in Time* off the shelf. He read the first chapter to El as they sat on the mattress, trying to give Meg a distinct voice whenever she spoke to herself. But he wasn’t sure that this chapter was the best thing to read at the moment; it was basically all about Meg feeling scared during a storm. Not the nicest thing to read while tensely waiting for their friends to return.

By the point he got to the point where Charles Wallace came up to talk to Meg, Mike could tell that El was listening intently, but his own mind was starting to drift.

“Why didn’t you come up to the attic?” Meg asked her brother, speaking as though he were at least her own age. “I’ve been scared stiff.”

“Too windy up in that attic of yours,” the little boy said. “I knew you’d be down. I put some milk on the stove for you. It ought to be hot by now.”

Mike paused, biting his lip, and he glanced up at El. She stared up at him, and he stayed silent for a minute, just staring at her face. He wasn’t sure if it was the lights on the ceiling that were still sparkling onto them, or if it was just a mix of his nerves, but she looked *really* pretty.

“Mike?”

He shook his head to clear it. “Sorry, just... you look nice.”

She blushed and glanced away, her smile brightening. “Thanks... you

look nice.”

Fuck. Now Mike was blushing, too. He slowly raised the book again, trying to move to the next sentence, but he wasn’t sure how to talk without stumbling over his words.

After a minute, he put the book down. “I... I wonder if the others are okay.”

El hesitated, and then said, “I can find out.”

“What?”

“I need the Bath.”

“The... Bath?”

El nodded. “They... they put me in the Bath. And I’d say what I heard. They only... only twice, but P-Papa said that I could help the others with it.”

“Are you saying that you can hear what other people are saying?”

“In the Bath. Where I float.”

Floating Bath? It took Mike a minute to ask, “Like a Sensory-Deprivation Tank?”

El shrugged.

“Well...” Mike turned towards the glass room, feeling his stomach drop as he did. “We don’t have one of those, but... maybe we might be able to improvise.”

El tapped on the glass, waiting until the door slid open. She walked in, saying, “Hold on.”

However, she felt Mike grab her hand from behind. She jumped and turned to face him, and he said, “I’ll come. If you need anything.”

She hesitated, and then nodded at him, and they walked into the

room together, simultaneously jumping when they heard the door shut, trapping them inside.

El said cross-legged on the floor, and Mike said, “I know it’s not a Deprivation Tank, but it’s cold enough that if you focus enough, you might be able to enter... what did you say it was called?”

“Void.”

“The Void, yeah.”

As Mike sat next to her, El asked, “Who?”

Mike considered. “Find Will first. We have to make sure he’s okay.”

El shut her eyes. After a second, she said, “Need something. Around eyes.”

“You need to block your eyes?”

“So I focus.”

Mike paused, and then reached into his pocket. He thought he had a scarf shoved in there from last winter. He had to dig under the flashlight, but he eventually did find it. “Will this work?” he asked as he handed it over.

El nodded, taking it and tying it around her eyes, fumbling a little as she did. Mike sat back, staring up at the ceiling. Maybe there was some way he could help her shield her senses. There had to be an extra way to help her block off her senses, maybe he could...

Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.

It might work. But at the same time... God, this was going to suck. If this backfired, they’d be way worse off. He knew that. But... he had to help her. And if she could talk to Will, it was worth it. They *had* to find him.

Slowly, as slowly as he dared, he raised his hand above his head. He took a deep breath, and stared at El. *Focus on her. Not the heat, not your blood, not your memories. Focus on her.*

Focus on her.

Mike stared at her face, and slowly, he felt light surrounding them. At first, he paled, and he started to feel too warm. He gripped his jacket in his free hand, feeling the fabric. He had to focus on that, and on El. Stay in the present, and keep the field up.

He stared at her face, and grabbed on his jacket, and breathed slowly, held up his hand. They were surrounded by light. *His* light.

He kept breathing slowly, and after a second, he realized something.

My forcefield's kind of pretty.

And after another minute, El said, “Will?”

El had succeeded. She'd entered the void.

Which, of course, meant she was terrified.

She'd only been there twice, but when she was there, it was for Papa and for the Lab. She'd repeated the words two men had said- one spoke in a language she didn't know, but she did her best to relay the message, and the other said a lot of scary, big words about “shutting down” and “illegality”, and it had taken El a while to transmit that.

It had taken the Bath to get her into the Void before, but she figured any kind of “sensory deprivation” would work. And after she'd started focusing in the glass room, suddenly she was feeling less air and more... more *stillness*.

And then she opened her eyes, and everything was black.

She slowly stood up- well, sort of. She could *almost* feel that she was still sitting down, that in reality she was in one place, but here, in the depths of her mind, she could stand and walk and go wherever she wanted.

And right now, she wanted to check on Will.

She focused on him in her thoughts, thinking about the brief time she'd seen him, about his face in Mike's photo.

She focused, and then she turned around. And in the middle of the blackness, there was a boy curled up on the floor.

"Will?"

He didn't react. She expected as much. The men she'd spied on never saw her, either. She simply walked closer, trying to get a better look. Figure out if he was alright.

As she approached, she noticed something else.

He was crying.

"Will!" El broke into a run, stopping just in front of him, something splashing under her feet; for some reason, the floor of the void was wet like the Bath. Maybe because of the Bath. She didn't know. And at this point, she didn't care. She had to get to Will.

She dropped down in front of him. He was definitely crying, and she looked over worriedly. At first glance, he didn't look hurt. But as she scanned him, she noticed what looked like some kind of burn on his side; it was hard to see, as his shirt was mostly covering it, but from what she could see, it looked like he'd been shocked. She flinched; she'd never been shocked herself, but she'd seen it happen to rowdy siblings, and she remembered the screams.

Her eyes fell onto his hands, which were the only part of his body that was actively moving. One hand was pulling on a glove that covered the other, trying to rip it off. His gloves seemed to be sewn onto the inside of his sleeves. Why would he sew gloves to his sleeves?

Wait- now that El thought about it, he hadn't had gloves when she saw him before. He touched the floor with his bare hands to suck up the colors. Could he only collect energy with his hands? Were they trying to block his powers?

If they were keeping his powers away from him, then he must not have let them control him. He must still be fighting.

“Will...” she said again.

At that moment, Will shot up, looking panicked; he looked a lot *worse* than she thought he would. His hair was a mess, his eyes were red, and he had a bruise forming on his cheek.

“Who’s there?” he said.

El froze. He... he couldn’t have heard her, could he? She tried to speak again, louder. “Will?”

“Who *is* that?” he yelled, a panicked edge in his voice. He stumbled up, stepping back, and then seemed to bounce off of something invisible, perhaps a wall. “Who *are* you?”

“Will, I’m a friend. I’m a friend.” she said.

“Get out of my *head!*” he threw his hands over his ears, screaming.
“Get *out!*”

“Will, I’m a friend! I’m with Mike!”

Will froze, still looking terrified. Slowly, he lowered his hands, and said, “What?”

“I’m with Mike. We’re coming to save you. Your friends are coming.”

“No, no. They can’t be here. They can’t come here. They’ll catch them. They’ll catch them like they caught me and Kali.”

“Kali?”

At that moment, another sound roared into El’s ears; the sound of a blaring alarm.

She reached up to cover her ears, but she recognized the sound. So did Will; he backed away, screaming, “Get out! Get them out! *Get them out!*”

“Will!” El screamed again.

“*Get them out!*”

El blinked, and the Void was gone.

The second El's eyes opened, Mike dropped his field.

He hoped she didn't notice that he was sweating and shaking; he'd never held a field for longer than a few seconds, and he only barely managed to make it through. It took him a few minutes to even get up the strength to say, "Wh-what happened?"

El stared at him. "Scared."

"He's scared?"

El nodded, adding, "L-loud noise."

"Loud noise? What does that mean?"

She paused, and then imitated a loud pinging.

"That sounds like an alarm." Mike said. "Why would they play an alarm?"

"Escape. Or..."

They stared at each other.

"They found them." Mike said. "We have to get over there. We have to save them."

He thought El might refuse; after all, that was her Lab, the place she'd been trapped.

However, what she said was, "Let's go."

In surprise, Mike could only stare for a second. And then, he repeated, "Yeah. Let's go."

28. Nobody's plans managed to factor one pissed-off teenager

Notes for the Chapter:

Unfortunately, this chapter is a bit short, but the next couple chapters get pretty damn hectic. (As a sidenote to the chapter length, I noticed a lot of you requested longer chapters- which is great! Thanks for that! It means I'm succeeding in writing lol. But I would like to note that I mostly determine chapter length by "Well that was four pages of Google Docs, that should be long enough" and then it turns out a lot shorter than I thought lol.)

Thanks for the comments! Love you all! :D

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Nobody's plans managed to factor one pissed-off teenager

Lucas, Dustin and Max had arrived by 7:30, and did nothing but watch the Lab for a few hours. Well, that was a lie. Lucas and Dustin had taught Max a couple clapping games, and they played I-Spy for a bit. It felt a bit weird to be playing "kiddie games"- as Max so eloquently put it- while waiting to break into a government Lab to rescue their superpowered friend, but there was really nothing else to do.

Around 10:00, though, Max pointed towards the gate. "What's that?"

They all looked down, to see a car drive up and stop just in front of the gate, probably waiting to be let in.

"That might be Hopper." Lucas said. "He said he was planning something, right?"

"Does he seriously think that they'll just give him Will if he asks

nicely?” Max asked.

“He’s the Chief, he’s probably got a bit more of a plan than that.” Dustin shrugged.

After a second, the gate opened, and the car drove in more.

They couldn’t see the person who got out of the car, but the uniform made it look like it was probably Hopper. He held the door open for a bit longer than usual, though, and Dustin said, “Is he having trouble closing it?”

“Lucas?” Max asked, an odd tone to her voice.

“Huh?”

“How are we going to get past that fence?”

They all stared at each other for a second, and then Lucas said, “Maybe I can use my powers while we’re in hyper-speed. I can probably blow a hole in there.”

“Yeah, that’ll work. Good thing we’re not trying to be incognito.”

“Speaking of which,” Dustin added, “How long do you think we should wait?”

Lucas pulled out his phone. “He just got in, so we should wait about five minutes. Give him some time to have an alibi before we break the fuck in.”

“Fuck.” Max groaned, flopping onto her back and staring up into the leaves. “Can’t we just go *now*?”

“I mean we *could*, but unless we want them to specifically get blamed for the shit that goes down, we should wait for a little bit.” Lucas said.

Dustin paused, then said, “You guys wanna play *Concentration* again?”

So the kids settled down, waiting impatiently for the right time.

And the right time came when the alarm went off.

The second that Joyce entered the Lab, she felt chills run down her spine. This place just felt *wrong*.

She followed Hopper for a bit- he had called in the Lab just an hour ago, telling them that he thought they might have a missing boy on their premises, and they'd invited him over to show him he was wrong. It was a real good thing that Joyce was able to hold her camouflage for an ungodly amount of time, otherwise she would be in some deep shit as she separated from him and the guards, moving away and ducking into another hall. As she did, she felt a keycard in her hands that she'd pickpocketed from one of the guards. She'd probably have to use this.

She figured that any incriminating files would be kept in the basement- or, if there wasn't one, in a similar dark room on the first floor. She needed to hurry up and find him, so that once she did, she could set something off and cause a distraction so that the kids could get Will and get out. Or, maybe, if she went fast enough, she could find him herself.

She *wanted* to find him. She wanted to find him and hug him and hurt everyone who'd dared to touch him, but at the same time, her camouflage might work, but not if they bumped into somebody. Will had a better chance with a girl who could run faster than anyone could see, who could get him out of the building in the blink of an eye.

Joyce went from door-to-door, looking for a staircase. When she finally found one, she slowly creaked it open, hoping that anybody on the security cameras would think it was a simple malfunction. She doubted that they could possibly suspect she was in; even if they remembered her as a teenager, they'd never known her real name, and they probably thought she was dead, or at least long gone, so hopefully they wouldn't have invisibility on their registry.

Hopefully.

She moved down the stairs, trying to be as silent as possible, finally reaching what seemed to be the lowest floor. She had to use the keycard on the door, and then once again, she had to take a long time opening the door, moving as silently as she dared. Joyce didn't like moving so slowly; she had to get everything *fast* so that she could get Will out as soon as possible. There was only one room-thankfully, she didn't want to have to look through multiple doors to figure out what she needed- and she walked in.

She'd been right; there were multiple filing cabinets lining the walls. She could see a single security camera in the corner, a light blinking beneath it. Joyce simply walked up to it and grabbed her scarf, tying it around the lens before letting it go. The second her fingers left the scarf, it popped into sight, blocking the view of the camera. That should buy her a few minutes.

The first section of filing cabinets held files on employees, something that Joyce was sure would be useful, but would take too long to sift through. The next held building plans and contracts, which would also take forever to find an issue with. Joyce dug through more drawers, seeing employees, contracts, employees, contracts.

Finally, she reached a corner of the room, and opened a file to find photos of the girl from Castle Byers- El. Well, here she was labelled *011*, and notes on her powers were listed. She appeared to be telekinetic, as well as having extrasensory perception. The next page was some child labelled *010*, and then a page on *009*. The entire file was filled with information, and Joyce shuddered as she started to see *Deceased* markings.

Well, this was the file she needed.

She shoved it into her coat pocket, watching it disappear into the air as she did.

Before she could pick up another, she could hear footsteps running down the hall. Cursing under her breath, Joyce grabbed a handful of files from the drawer, shoving them into her coat and shutting the drawer before somebody could walk in.

However, before somebody could, the alarms went off.

Joyce froze, glancing towards the camera to make sure it was still off, and then to herself to make sure she was still invisible. It didn't *seem* like she'd been caught.

The footsteps ran back up the stairs, and Joyce slowly exited the room, peering up after them.

What was going on?

The guard knocked on the door. "Police're here. We're moving out. Just stay still and let us take you, and nobody gets hurt."

There was no response- good. Solitary was finally working.

However, the second the guard opened the door, his vision was filled with flames. As he screamed and jumped back- and he heard his companions start to yell as well- he realized with a flash that the fire wasn't hot.

The fire wasn't real.

The door flung open, and he was tackled to the ground. And in only a few seconds, his gun had been drawn and fired.

In three shots, all the guards dropped to the ground.

And Kali stood up, grabbing onto the wall for support and feeling the gun in her fingers. She glared down at the men, and kicked one of the bodies as she passed, reaching to collect the weapons. She'd need them; she was definitely going to get opposition in her flight.

As she pocketed the other guns, she heard the alarms start to blare. But that didn't matter. She didn't care who knew she was out anymore.

Because she wouldn't hesitate to kill anybody on the way out.

But first, there was a boy still there that she needed to set free.

29. Everybody's trying to find Will

Notes for the Chapter:

Alternate title for this chapter: Midas attempts to write action scenes; Hijinks ensue.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Everybody's trying to find Will

“What the fuck?”

One of the security monitors swore as he flipped a switch, setting an alarm off. Hopper glanced up; they'd been very smugly showing him recordings of the entire property from November 6, proudly declaring that there was no way a boy could have gotten in, as if Hopper wasn't completely aware that security footage could be faked or replaced. However, just a few seconds ago, one of the monitors had shown three guards were lying on the ground, and a teenage girl was rushing away from them, a gun in her hands. If Hopper had to guess, that was probably Eight. But even with a gun, he doubted she would get far on her own.

“Who's that supposed to be?” Hopper asked calmly, and the two guards glanced up at him. After a few tense seconds, Hopper said, “Well, guess there's no point in subtlety now.”

He grabbed one and threw him against the wall, moving in a flash to push the other one's head into the table. Hopefully that would be enough to knock them out. He rushed over to the door, trying the handle first; damn, they'd locked the door. Probably didn't want him to run if he did something suspicious.

Well, that didn't matter.

He simply shut his eyes and punched the door, and it flew off its hinges, crashing into the wall.

Fuck. He'd forgotten how strong he could be when he actually tried.

He glanced towards the Monitors again. The girl was rushing down a monitor for the sixth floor, opening doors at random, probably looking for something.

So, it looked like he was going to the sixth floor.

"Holy shit, guys, what's that?"

The three kids all turned towards the building, hearing a distant alarm sounding inside.

"That doesn't sound good." Max said, getting to her feet.

"Holy shit." Dustin repeated, shaking his head.

"Alright, that sounds like our cue." Lucas said, jumping to his feet.
"Dustin, get the cameras, then Max and I will go in."

"What happens if you get caught?" Dustin asked, as Max ran to grab onto Lucas's arm. "And they sedate Max?"

"We'll hide in a closet for a while. Don't worry." Lucas said. "But whatever you do, don't let them get to Mike and El."

Dustin glanced over his shoulder, and then held out his hands, letting electricity spark between his fingers. Lucas got his drift, summoning some energy himself. Within a few seconds, the two flashed into their transformations.

Max glanced at them. "Should I..." She hadn't yet transformed outside of the glass room.

"Give it your best shot." Dustin replied.

Max shut her eyes and flapped her hands, feeling the wind on her face as they moved faster and faster. She took a deep breath and clapped, and then felt the jolt of energy shoot through her body, her hair pulling itself back. She opened her eyes, turning to the boys, and

glanced down at her red-and-blue hands. “Sweet.” she said. “Hey, before we go, you guys have superhero names, right? Should I have one?”

The other two boys glanced to each other, and Lucas said, “Well, yeah. If you’re gonna be in our group, you’ve gotta have a superhero name.”

Max thought for a second, and then smiled. “Zoomer.”

“Alright, then, Zoomer.” Dustin held out his hand. “Let’s be heroes and break into government property!”

Dragonfire threw out his hands, and his energy shot out, blasting into the fence. It sparked, threatening to catch fire for several seconds, before settling down. The kids all breathed a sigh of relief, seeing the hole big enough for them to rush through.

“Alright, grab on.” Zoomer said, holding out her arms. As soon as the boys grabbed onto her, she rushed up to the building, dropping her speed once they were against the wall. “Cameras.” she said.

Cyclone shut his eyes, placing his hands on the wall. Zoomer watched him for a second, noticing that there were small sparks shooting from his hands, only just large enough to see. And in a second, she spotted sparks above them; the camera that had been positioned above their heads had its planned electrical malfunction, and the light beneath it died. Cyclone turned to them, opening his eyes again, and Zoomer noticed that his normally blue irises had a golden tint to them now.

“We’ve got maybe five minutes.” he said.

Zoomer grabbed Dragonfire’s arm. “Not with me.”

Cyclone hesitated, glancing towards the forest, and then said, “Let me come.” When they hesitated, he added, “Nobody’s getting out of this building before us, and I’m useless out here. Do you expect me to just electrocute everyone who leaves? I want to help.”

Dragonfire and Zoomer glanced to each other, and then she said,

“Well, hurry up and grab my arm. We haven’t got all day.”

Joyce found Jim in the middle of the hallway a few floors up. She hesitated a second, before rushing forwards and tapping his shoulder. He jumped, and she said, “Chill out, Chief, it’s me. What’s going on? Is it Will?”

“It’s the other girl in the Lab. She broke out and she’s got a gun.” he said, starting to walk again; she rushed to keep pace with him, though he still couldn’t see her. “Stay behind me; if she runs into me, the bullets won’t hurt and I can calm her down, but they could still hit you.”

“Where’s Will?”

“Haven’t found him yet, but the girl was on the sixth floor, so he’s probably close. We’re going there now.”

Joyce hesitated, and then said, “Do you think we’ll run into anybody else?”

“We can handle a few soldiers, can’t we?”

A door flew open, and several men rushed out. They stared at Hopper for a good, tense second, and then Joyce said, while still completely invisible, “Let’s find out.”

She rushed forwards, knowing full well she was still camouflaged, and leapt on one of the men, grabbing his arm and twisting it backwards. She could hear Hopper charge, too, throwing men into walls and to the floor with barely any effort on his part. As she kicked the legs out from the man she was attacking and leapt over him, kicking at another soldier, she wondered how Hopper had managed to hide his power while working in the police force so long. Though, to be fair, she’d done a fair job of hiding her own powers during stressful situations.

Joyce jumped up, giving the two men on the floor a split second to try and piece together why they’d been knocked down by an invisible force, and then jumped on one, slamming his head into the floor, and

kicked the other one again, letting Hopper take care of him next. She turned her attention to the man on the floor, before grabbing his gun off of his belt, watching it vanish into her hands, and then throwing it against the wall. He wasn't moving much; must have gotten knocked out.

She looked up, seeing that Hopper had managed to take care of the others pretty well. She sighed, and shut her eyes, feeling a warmth start to spread over her body as she allowed her camouflage to drop. Hopper turned to her, and she smiled at him. "I missed that." she said softly.

Hopper paused, before saying, "Yeah. Me, too."

He turned towards the door that the Guards had come from, revealing a stairwell. Joyce and Hopper glanced at each other, and then rushed inside.

Will didn't know what was going on, but he was in a panic. The alarms were going off, some girl he didn't know was talking in his head- apparently he'd already fucking cracked- and his friends might be throwing themselves into danger just to get him out. He didn't need *more* people to save, he just needed his powers back. But he couldn't do that if he couldn't get these fucking gloves off.

As soon as the girl had stopped speaking, he crawled into the corner, getting back to work on ripping the gloves off. But it was *useless*; the gloves were slippery, and he wasn't that strong to begin with, and the inside fabric was starting to grate against his skin. He tried to force himself to stop crying as he kept ripping at the gloves, tried to keep his sobs from sounding too loud. If he could just get one tear, one tiny tear, he could work with it. He could enlarge it, get his palm free, suck the colors from the floor and use it to save himself. Please, please, just one rip...

There were footsteps in the hall. Will immediately flinched, shrinking farther into the corner, pulling harder at the gloves, his crying impossible to stop. He just needed to grab the black, to disappear. He *had* to disappear.

The door opened, and soldiers came in. “We’re moving out.”

“Wh- what?” Will choked out, shrinking into the corner.

The soldiers weren’t going to wait for him; one grabbed his arm, forcing him to his feet and pushing him forwards. Will stumbled, feeling someone grab his arms from behind.

“No! No!” Will screamed, as they started dragging him out, trying to kick at the men behind him. “No, let me go! *Let me go!*”

“Shut *up!*!” one of the men shouted, and Will felt a sharp jab in his face. It took him several panicked seconds to realize that he’d been slapped, which didn’t help his terror. He was pushed into the hall, and started screaming again, trying to make himself heard, desperate for somebody to help him; he hadn’t screamed when he was kidnapped until it was too late, and that was his mistake. That just got him another slap, and a hissed, “Do that shit again. We’ve still got the fucking cattle prod.”

Will was having trouble breathing normally, and he couldn’t stop his heart beating like a thunderstorm as he was dragged down the hall. He didn’t know where they were going, or what they were going to do to him, or if anyone could find him if he was moved somewhere else, or if they’d let him use his powers again, or how long he could last in this hellhole before he broke and let them do whatever they wanted to him. He wasn’t entirely sure that he hadn’t already broken, and that thought was ripping him apart.

He heard a door slam ahead, somewhere down the next hall; he couldn’t see who was there, but he took the chance to let out a piercing shriek. In response, he was thrown into the wall, his body screaming from the impact. He knew they were going to electrocute him again, they were going to shock him again, and he couldn’t do anything, so he just kept screaming.

“*Let me GO!*”

But before he could feel the shock, feel the electricity *burning* him, he heard a gunshot.

And he heard a body behind him crumple to the ground.

“Fuck!” the man holding him screamed, and there was another shot. Will felt the hands holding him against the wall slack, and suddenly he was dropped to the floor, only barely able to raise his arms to shield his head from the crash. He could see another body on the ground ahead of him, but it wasn’t moving, and there was a pool of blood on the ground.

Oh, God.

Oh, fuck.

Will felt his entire body turn cold as a third gunshot rang out, and his eyes grew wet and warm, and the last guard crumpled to the ground, landing in front of him. Will trembled, eyes wide, trying to force himself to sit up, but instead falling back onto the floor. He shut his eyes, trying not to face the bodies on the floor as more gunshots rang out, probably hitting the guards to make sure that they never got up again, or maybe aiming for *him* and missing horribly. He felt sick; he wanted to puke more than anything.

Slowly, he managed to turn his face ahead, just in time to see Kali drop her gun into a pocket.

He only barely recognized her; he’d never seen her in any decent lighting. She had purple hair, he noticed, and her black jacket had been tied around her waist. She turned to stare at him, and rushed forwards, pulling him up into a sitting position, her face suddenly dropping into a worried expression.

“Will? Is that you?”

Will stared at her in horror for a good several seconds, the sound of the gunshots still echoing in his brain, the feeling of hands throwing him into the wall and then suddenly letting go still fresh in his mind.

“Will? What did they do?”

Will opened his mouth, spending several seconds struggling to speak, the alarms somehow getting louder and louder and drowning out his thoughts. He finally managed to say, “Help...”

And then he burst into sobs again, and Kali hugged him to her. “It’s okay, it’s okay. We’re getting out of here. We’re getting out. We’re getting you home to your Mom and your friends.”

She slowly maneuvered her arms, lifting him to his feet as she stood up, struggling to support him; he still wasn’t sure if he could stand up on his own. She glanced down at his hands, a dark look on her face. “Did they do this to you?”

Will wasn’t sure he could speak; he still felt a cold fear in his chest.

“It’s okay. We’re getting out. Can you move on your own?”

He managed to shake his head, and she said, “Alright. They’ll be going after us, but I’ve got my powers. We’re going down the stairs, and then we’ll find my Gang, and then we’ll get you-”

At that moment, they heard something explode beneath them. The floor shook, and Kali let out a curse.

“What the hell?” she muttered, sounding confused. She didn’t know what that was.

But Will had a guess.

“Kal...” he said quietly, his face paling. “My friends.”

Kali sighed, staring back towards the direction of the stairwell. “Fuck.”

30. I already used the chapter title “Everything goes to shit” but I need to use it again

CHAPTER THIRTY

I already used the chapter title “Everything goes to shit” but I need to use it again

“Just keep moving.” Zoomer sighed, rolling her eyes and struggling to keep them open.

The three of them had finally reached the third floor, pushing open the door before moving to another. Unfortunately, they were going a bit slow at the moment; Zoomer had to drop them out of speedmode in order to unlock doors with a keycard that she’d swiped from a man they passed in the hallway; it wouldn’t unlock unless it was in normal time. And while they moved as fast as they could, everytime they dropped, the alarms blared in their ears and they had to move as fast as they could before somebody could walk into the hall and catch sight of them.

Most of the rooms had been either boring or creepy- they were either empty and lined with bottles or files, or holding chairs with restraints and wires. Every time they opened the door to the latter, Dragonfire gasped, and Cyclone would let out a string of curse words and Zoomer would feel cold shivers down her spine. Did El really grow up here? Zoomer was getting sick just peering into those rooms, she had no idea how El would be able to *stand* being in them.

The biggest problem was that Zoomer was getting tired as *fuck*.

Normally, her powers didn’t lead her to expend a lot of energy, unless she was in speedmode for over an hour. However, at the point where they stopped at every doorway and went in-and-out of her powered speed every few fucking seconds, Zoomer was starting to feel... well, *exhausted*. Not that she was going to tell the boys. They would just make her go outside while they found Will, and she wasn’t going to have any of that shit.

Still, she felt like she was going to pass out.

They pushed open an unlocked door, seeing only a dark closet. The three maneuvered inside, trying their best not to let go of each other and stepping over buckets. After scanning the area, they figured that Will wasn't there. Once they left, they moved to the next door, seeing a keycard-scanner next to it.

"Shit." Zoomer sighed, and she planted her feet, letting reality catch up to her. Dragonfire and Cyclone both had to pause for a second, breathing slowly to calm themselves down; they were getting used to speedmode pretty fast, but still didn't exactly feel great after stopping. Thankfully, that meant they didn't notice that she had to take a second to slap herself, after blacking out for a second and almost toppling over on her feet.

You can do this. You can do this.

Zoomer whipped the card out of her pocket, throwing it into the switch and swiping it through. The second the light turned green, she threw open the door.

She realized her mistake after a full second, as Dragonfire let out a quick yell and the door opened to reveal a room full of men, watching several blank monitors, who turned to stare at her.

Shit. She was still in normal time. Fuck.

"Uh, bye." Zoomer waved, turning to grab the boys and run as fast as she could.

She was only in speedmode for a second, when reality caught up to her again, hitting her square the stomach. And she could do nothing as she toppled to the ground, her mind going black.

In a flash, Dragonfire had jumped inbetween Zoomer and the room, throwing up his energy shield as the door opened and the men started shooting.

Cyclone dropped to the ground, picking up Zoomer and shaking her

slightly. “Max? Max, wake up!”

“Shit, shit.” Dragonfire dropped down, noticing her slow breathing.
“Shit, she looks just like Will when he...”

Will was the only one of them who’d knocked himself out before, and it had looked just like that.

“Well, fuck.” Cyclone said. The boys both glanced back to see that more soldiers had run into the hallway. Dragonfire threw up another hand to extend the energy shield, pushing it forwards, keeping the stream of tranqs from reaching them.

“I’m putting her in the closet before she starts can get hit!” Cyclone announced to Dragonfire, running to the only door that he could reach without running into his friend’s shield. He opened it, gently placing Zoomer on the floor, before sighing and shutting the closet and turning to see Dragonfire throw up another shield, as someone had apparently called reinforcements and guards were running down another end of the hall.

Unfortunately, three shields was quite a bit to hold at a time, and Cyclone was just in time to see one of Dragonfire’s shields drop. The guards aimed for them, and Cyclone let out a yell, shooting lightning towards them.

At the exact same time, Dragonfire shot around, sending a blast of energy in the same direction.

The energy and lightning collided, and instantly caused an explosion.

The building seemed to shake as the blast threw everybody backwards. Dragonfire landed right by the closet, while Cyclone was thrown against the wall. He let out a groan, looking up to make sure the guards were equally incapacitated by the burst, and then sending another lightning strike.

He turned back to Dragonfire, rushing forwards and standing in front of him, ready to defend as the other shields started to drop.

“What the fuck did we do?” Dragonfire asked, groaning and slowly getting to his feet.

"I don't know," Cyclone said, shooting him a grin, "But we should totally do it again."

"*Absolutely not!*"

Will was still panicking, stumbling after Kali as she rushed into the stairwell. She had one hand holding his, making sure he didn't fall too far behind. The sound of the alarm kept flooding in and out of his ears, starting to overload his senses. It didn't help that he hadn't moved much all week, that his legs felt like lead, that his head still hurt and his hands were trapped, and he felt *so* helpless and scared, and he'd just seen three men shot dead in front of him. *Kali* had shot three men dead in front of him, and he'd seen the life leave their eyes.

He *really* wanted to throw up, but he didn't think they had the time.

Kali suddenly pushed him into the wall, covering him with her body and saying, "Be quiet!"

Will kept shaking, biting back more tears as he heard footsteps rushing up the hall. The men ran up, and then ran past.

Kali backed away from Will, glancing upwards, and slowly drew the gun from her pocket. She looked after the men who were disappearing up the stairs, watching them as if she wanted to follow and shoot, but she glanced at Will and stopped. "Let's get your friends." she said again, moving the gun to her free hand and leading him away again.

She didn't put away the gun. Will doubted that she would.

As they reached another landing, they heard more footsteps-definitely not as much as before. Kali turned, prepared to hide Will again, but then glanced down at the gun, looking as if she was calculating the odds in her head. She took a breath, and then pushed Will behind her, saying, "Stay down!"

Suddenly, the person running up burst into view. And Will could see Chief Jim Hopper sliding to a stop in front of them.

Kali paused, confused at the sudden appearance of someone who wasn't wearing a Laboratory uniform, but she kept the gun pointed and at the ready. Hopper stared at her, throwing his hands up, and saying, "It's okay! It's okay, I'm a friend. I just want to talk."

Before Kali could reply, they heard a disembodied gasp. Will peered around Kali some more, seeing nobody but the Chief for a good few seconds. However, as Kali glanced towards the source of the sound, someone did appear, seemingly out of thin air.

Will stared for a good minute, a small relief growing in his chest. "M-Mom?" he said, his voice still shaking a little.

Joyce stared at him, for a minute, and then rushed forwards. Kali sidestepped a little, keeping her gun pointed at Hopper but still eyeing the woman suspiciously. But Will barely noticed this, because he threw his arms around his Mom, letting her hug him and sobbing into her chest.

"It's okay, it's okay, Will, baby, I'm here. I'm right here."

She was there. *She was there*. She'd come to find him, and she was getting him out of here, and his *Mom was there*.

After a moment, Joyce pulled away, staring Will in the face. She raised her hand to a bruise on his cheek, and as he flinched a little, she said, "Oh, hell, what did they do to you?"

Will bit his lip, shaking his head. "Mom, my friends, th-they're downstairs, we have to go..."

"Kid, you're definitely hurt." Hopper said, glancing away briefly from Kali. "We're getting you the hell out of here."

"I could..." Will hesitated, and then glanced down at the gloves. He looked away quickly, not wanting the reminder of his capture, but Joyce noticed.

"What's this?" she asked.

"They're restraints." Kali said, drawing everybody's attention. "He can't use his powers without his hands."

Will flinched, shaking his head, trying to communicate *they don't know about that*, but to his complete shock, Joyce said, "Well, don't worry, we'll get those off once we're out. And- are you Eight?- please put the gun down. It won't work on Hopper, and Will and I aren't a threat."

Kali stared at her for a minute. "How do you know who I am?"

"Your sister found us."

A look of pure relief spread across her face, and she finally lowered the gun. "Eleven?"

"Yes, she's safe." Joyce said.

"Joyce." Hopper interrupted, and they turned to see him glancing down the stairs. "Joyce, somebody could come at any time. Get them to a safe spot, and I'll get the rest of the kids."

"I- I want to help..." Will said.

"We're getting you out." Joyce shook her head, grabbing Will's arm and helping him to his feet. She turned to Kali, asking, "Are you coming?"

Kali hesitated, and then said, "I want to see my sister." She glanced towards Hopper. "Will you need help getting the others out?"

"Hopefully not." he said. "Go with Joyce, kid, and we'll meet you-"

"Kid?" Kali looked offended.

"If you're coming with me, grab my hand." Joyce said, holding out her free hand to the teenager. Kali glanced at her suspiciously, and then shoved the gun into a pocket and grabbed onto Joyce. Joyce gave Hopper a quick, "Be careful," and then the three of them vanished, and Hopper rushed off to follow the sounds of the fight.

On the other side of the forest, unobserved and unexpected by everybody inside the Lab, El and Mike arrived. El stopped pushing

the bike faster with her mind, and Mike hit the breaks before they could skid out of the forest and into plain view.

They stared at the Lab, hearing the alarms blaring, and seeing the lights flashing, and then Mike said, “Looks like we arrived just in time.”

31. El's favorite therapy involves Destroying Everything

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

El's favorite therapy involves Destroying Everything

Mike stared ahead, his eyes flickering down to a gaping hole in the fence, big enough for them to fit through. “Damn. Something’s going on in there... okay, okay, I’m gonna go in, and... El?”

He turned, seeing his friend standing next to him, staring ahead at the Lab. Her face had gone pale, and her eyes had glazed over. Mike recognized the expression, recognized the fear that she was clearly having at the prospect of returning. It must not have hit her what breaking everybody out would entail until that moment- hell, Mike wasn’t entirely sure *he* was processing everything right now. What he did know was that he might have to summon his Field again- and he was not looking forward to that.

“Hey.” Mike slowly leaned over, brushing his hand against hers. As she felt that, she seemed to come back to reality, turning towards Mike with a panicked look overcoming her expression. “Hey, listen...”

He glanced between her and the building, and then quickly said, “If... if you don’t want- I mean, if you can’t go in, that’s okay. It’s okay, I wouldn’t want to go into... into the Shed, either.”

He hadn’t even been able to walk by the same *neighborhood* after the accident;- until they moved, Mike had biked the long way home from school. He just *couldn’t* go that way, couldn’t go down without remembering rushing down the sidewalk with Nancy and ducking into the first shelter they could find. And that had just been *one* shitty incident- from what he could gather, El had been tortured her entire life in that Lab. He couldn’t imagine how someone could *do* that to anybody, to *her*, but more importantly, he understood why El was frozen.

"If you want to stay here, you can be our lookout. You can make sure we get out okay. I'm just gonna go in, get everybody, and then get out. I'll meet you back here. And if you get in trouble, just yell for me, I'll try to come back. Nothing's going to happen to you while I'm here."

El stared at him again, and then reached forwards to grab his hand. She leaned forwards, staring at his face, and then froze again. Mike was aware that their faces were *very* close together, and suddenly he felt very warm. They stared for a moment, and then Mike pulled her into a hug, keeping himself loose in case she wanted to pull away. To the contrary, she hugged him back, grabbing onto him tightly and rocking slightly as they stood there.

After a second, she pulled away, still staring at him, and he said, "I'll be right back. Stay safe, please."

He turned to go, walking a little towards the Lab, feeling a chill rise inside him as he got closer to the place.

He only took a few steps, before he felt cold fingers wrap around his hand.

Mike stopped, and then slowly turned, staring at El. She gave him a determined look, and then said, "Friends protect each other."

"Are you... are you sure?"

She nodded, and he grabbed her hand tighter.

"I'll protect you." he assured her.

El gave him a look that plainly said *I don't need it*, which Mike definitely knew. "I'll protect you." she said out loud.

And they went in together.

The second they entered the building, El grabbed onto Mike tighter and started to shake. Mike immediately said, "It's okay. I'm here. You're not staying. We're getting everybody out."

It didn't help that the lights were flashing slightly, and they could hear the sounds of a fight several floors above. There weren't any people around, either, which was... worrying.

"Which way are the stairs?" Mike asked cautiously.

El hesitated, and then started leading the way, turning down a hall. Mike followed closely, trying to keep his face straight and his breath steady. This place was giving him a cold feeling, a dark feeling, and he really hoped they could get everybody and get out of there as fast as they could, and then they wouldn't have to stay there longer than they had to.

El led him to a doorway, about to push it open. However, she stopped after a second, staring in another direction. "El?" Mike said carefully.

El was staring at something far away, narrowing her eyes. Mike listened, at first not hearing anything unusual over the alarm. And then he heard it.

Footsteps.

"*Fuck!*" he yelled, and threw the door open, dragging El along with him. The door slammed, and Mike only took a brief look at the stairs before the two of them started sprinting up the steps.

They ran quickly, and Mike thought there might be somebody following them, but he couldn't hear well over the alarms and didn't dare to look. He and El skidded to a stop on one of the stair landings, though, upon hearing what might be footsteps above them. Mike froze up, his breath catching in his throat, and El managed to move first, pushing open the door on the wall and taking the lead in dragging him off.

The door slammed behind them as they rushed down the hall, the alarms starting to feel louder and louder. The two of them finally turned a corner, seeing a door at the end of the hall. El started to slow, but Mike just dragged her along, his thoughts going numb as he only thought about getting somewhere *safe*.

He threw open the door, and they ran in, freezing in place as the

door slammed behind them, muffling the alarms.

Up ahead was a large, empty room, blindingly white and shining with fluorescent lights. It was mostly empty, except for a metal table in front of the far wall.

The far wall, which was made of glass.

Behind that glass was another room, one with another table and what looked like a lot of wires bundled together. But the wires weren't scaring Mike, and neither was the room, really. It was what the room reminded him of.

Mike's hand slowly slipped out of El's, and he backed towards the door, almost on instinct. His mind had gone completely blank, his only thought being to *get out*.

He stopped, though, right in front of the door, reaching for the knob. He managed to croak out, "El... El, we have to go."

El stayed stock-still, staring ahead at the room.

"El, please, let's go."

Mike figured that El had been there before, judging by the way she stared, horrified, at the room ahead. He figured she would want to leave.

He was wrong about the latter.

El slowly approached the wall, before running to the far door, the one beside the glass, forcing it open and bursting in. Mike let out a small screech at the noise, before staring at her through the window. She ran to the wires, grabbing them; it looked like they were all strapped to a hat or something.

El held the wires for a second, and then screamed and threw them onto the table. She stepped back and stared at it, and the hat levitated into the air. She stared for a fraction of a second, and then she let it crash into the table. Mike jumped as the table itself split, and it all fell to the ground. El let out a scream, kicking the pieces and sending them flying with her powers, letting it all crash and slam

and break apart. Mike backed against the door, emotions swirling all around him, as he watched El destroy everything she could.

After what felt like forever, El stopped, panting hard and staring down at the floor. The table was shattered into pieces, and the wires were broken apart and torn to shreds. The only thing that remained intact was the glass window.

Mike stared for a second, and El slowly turned to him, her face scarily blank. And then, after a second, she dropped to the floor.

“El!” Mike yelled, and without thinking, he rushed towards the door, running into the room. He felt a sharp chill rush up his veins the second his feet stepped past the wall, but he didn’t care; he simply jumped over pieces of table and wires and knelt next to El. “El, are you okay?”

She looked up at him, and he saw the tears streaming down her face. He didn’t know if they were tears of anger or pain or sadness, but he only saw them for a second before El threw her arms around him and buried her face in his sweater, starting to sob. Mike shut his eyes and hugged her back, whispering comfort and trying not to notice where they were, what was going on, what they had to do. She needed him. She needed him and he had to help.

After a minute, she said quietly, “Let’s find our friends.”

And Mike grabbed her hand and helped her up, and they left the glass room of shattered items behind them.

32. Hopper saves the Kids and then immediately loses track of them

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry I didn't update yesterday. As you may have noticed, AO3 kinda... glitched out on a lot of people.

As a plus side, I've gotten a few chapters into Part II and I can't wait for you all to read it! It'll be a bit... happier than the other parts will be. Lots of fluff and slice-of-life superheroing (don't worry though, there IS a plot lol).

Thanks for your comments, love you! :D

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Hopper saves the Kids and then immediately loses track of them

Dragonfire, after checking on Zoomer again, yelled, “Please, let’s try not to blow shit up again!”

“I really suggest the opposite, that was awesome!” Cyclone smirked, summoning a zap of electricity to shoot towards one of the soldiers running towards them.

“Yeah, and we almost *died!*”

“So did they!”

Dragonfire ducked as gunfire started, rolling on the ground and then raising his hands, letting red energy burst from his fingertips and send the soldiers flying. He heard footsteps behind them. Shit. Someone were coming from another direction. He and Cyclone turned, jumping to their feet, prepared to attack any soldiers, only to freeze in place as Chief Hopper ran in.

He turned to the boys, who were staring at him in shock, and he said,

“What are you kids doing here?”

They still stared, slowly realizing that Hopper might not recognize them- he didn’t know that they even had powers, let alone their identities.

“Finding the lost kid.” Cyclone finally said.

“He’s safe, and now we just have to get you guys out.” Hopper said.
“Come on, let’s go.”

The boys looked at each other, and then Dragonfire said, “We’ve got another one, in- in the closet.”

“She’s knocked herself out.” Cyclone added.

“Shit...” Hopper groaned, and he moved towards the closet. He paused, and then grabbed the door, ripping it off its hinges. The boys both gasped, as Hopper let out a curse. “Sorry, fuck, didn’t mean to do that. But I’ve been knocking people around all day, kinda hard to slow down after that.”

He reached down and lifted Zoomer off the ground, saying, “There should be a room just a few hallways down with an antidote to sedative- even if she’s just knocked herself with her powers, the antidote should work, but she probably won’t be happy about it. We’ll go that way first.”

“She... she should wake up in about twenty minutes.” Dragonfire said as Hopper started walking, still a little in shock from the strength the Chief had just demonstrated.

“We don’t have that much time, and we don’t actually know how long she’ll be asleep. I’ve known powered people who’ve knocked themselves out for days.” Hopper explained, turning a corner as the boys ran to follow. “What can she do?”

“Run really fast.” Dragonfire said. “Like, ‘time stops around her’ fast.”

“So she can get you all out as quickly as possible. That’s good.”

He stopped at a door, considered, and then kicked it. It flew off the

hinges, hitting the far wall.

“Sick!” Cyclone cheered, incredibly impressed by the adult’s powers.

Hopper walked in, flipping on the lights. “Good, this is right.” he said.

Dragonfire and Cyclone rushed in after him as Hopper put Zoomer on the table, running to the shelves lining the walls, which were filled with medicine containers. Dragonfire went to Zoomer first, standing over her and holding out his hands, as if ready to fight should more people arrive. Cyclone, however, rushed over to Hopper. “How’d you know this was here?”

“Got a map of the Lab, studied it.” Hopper then grabbed a handful of darts filled with red liquid off the shelf. “This should be it.”

“And since when do you have powers?”

Hopper was silent for a second, taking one of the darts and flipping it in his hand. “I was about sixteen. How old are you?”

“T-twelve...” Cyclone saw Dragonfire shake his head wildly, and then added, “-ish.”

“Twelve-ish?”

“Well, we don’t... uh...” Cylcone began.

At that moment, Hopper stuck the dart in Zoomer’s arm. Dragonfire let out a surprised scream, and yelled, “What the fuck?”

“Sorry, there’s no other way to get it into her.” Hopper said, watching the dart as the red liquid disappeared- *shit*, it was injected into her. The Chief then pulled the dart out, throwing it against the wall, and then pocketed the rest. “She’ll be up in about a-”

They heard more footsteps, and Hopper said, “Shit.”

“We can-” Dragonfire began.

“I’ll take care of it.” Hopper said. “Watch the girl.”

He rushed out. The boys turned back to Zoomer, staring for a minute. After a second, her eyes shot open and she shot up, yelling, “Fuck!”

“Whoa!” Cyclone jumped back.

Zoomer immediately turned around to Dragonfire. “What happened? Where am I?”

“Are you okay?” Dragonfire asked.

“I was in the fucking hallway, and now I’m *here*. Did we get caught?”

“Well, at least she’s not tripping out again.” Cyclone muttered under his breath.

“We’re fine, Hopper’s taking care of everything.”

“He found us?”

Cyclone slowly approached the door, peering out to see if he could see Hopper.

“Well, uh, I don’t think he knows it’s *us*...”

Hopper must have rushed into another hall; he could hear some sounds of distant fighting. However, he heard another sound that made him pale.

“Hey, guys?”

“What?” Zoomer whipped around, glaring at him. Yikes, something was pissing her off.

“Uh, someone’s coming from the other direction.” Cyclone said. “We’re gonna have to fight.”

“I’ll deal with it.” Zoomer said, moving to stand up, and instead falling off the table.

“Shit!” Dragonfire rushed over, managing to catch her before she hit the floor. “Shit, you might still have some issues.”

Cyclone rushed over, too, abandoning the door to help Max get to her

feet.

“I can *deal!*!” Zoomer tried to stand up again. “Let me-”

They suddenly heard shouts from the hallway. They all turned, hearing what sounded like men being thrown against the wall.

“The fuck?” Cyclone muttered.

Yes, men were definitely being thrown around. Someone was getting rid of the soldiers that were coming towards them.

After a second, he yelled, “Who’s there?”

“Shut *up!*” Zoomer elbowed him. “That could be bad!”

“They’re beating the shit outta those guys, they’re probably on our side.” Cyclone reasoned.

They all stared back at the door, to see who would come in.

After a second, they saw a girl peer through the doorway, a hopeful expression on her face.

“El!” they all yelled.

A bright smile spread across her face. El rushed over, saying, “You’re safe!”

She stopped just short of them, looking down at Zoomer. “Your legs?”

“They’ll be okay, Dustin and Lucas are just being assholes.” Zoomer lied.

“What are you doing here?” Dragonfire asked concernedly.

“We came for you.”

“We?”

Before she could answer, they all heard a gunshot. Something soared above their heads, and they turned to see a bullet hole in the wall.

A warning shot.

They looked back at the door, to see a woman in a suit pointing her gun right at them. The woman gave them dark looks, and said, “Hands up.”

“She can’t stand.” Dragonfire protested, gesturing to Zoomer.

“I’ll stand if I want to.” Zoomer muttered.

“Not the moment.” Cyclone added.

“Go.” El said, eyes narrowing. She was probably preparing to throw the woman, but there was something else in her eyes, something dark.

“Stand down, Eleven.” the woman said.

“No.”

“Stand *down*.” a scary smirk rose on her face. “You don’t want Brenner to have to punish these children for you, do you?”

El froze.

“Do you think they’re your friends?” the woman said. “You can’t have any, Eleven. You’re ours.”

El took a breath, and then said again, “No.” She stood up a bit straighter, and then said, “No.”

She took a threatening step forwards, and then gasped. Something had pushed the Woman in the back, shoving her forwards. The kids turned to El, who looked just as confused as they did.

The woman tripped over something, falling over, and they all saw Mike standing in the doorway, one hand extended towards the woman, the other shoved in his jacket pocket.

“Sorry I’m late.” he said. “Wanted to make sure those guys weren’t gonna follow us.”

“What guys?” Cyclone asked, shocked.

“What are you *doing* here?” Dragonfire added.

The woman started to get up again, and Mike moved towards her. She looked up at him, pissed as hell, but after a second, she froze, staring at Mike’s face, confusion spreading across her expression. “What the—”

Mike seemed just as puzzled at her reaction, which gave the woman enough time to jump forwards and grab him by the jacket. The kids screamed, watching her move to pin him down. El started forwards, prepared to defend him, only to stop when Mike kicked the woman in the chest. She let out a yell, and her arm slacked enough for Mike to break her grip and reach into his jacket pocket. He ripped himself away, pulled Max’s flashlight out of his pocket, and then used it to slap her across the face.

The woman dropped to the ground, and Mike paused to breathe for a second, before hitting her again in the head, knocking her to the floor. He glared down at her, fury in his eyes, as he hit her again. “For fuck’s sake!” he yelled. “Don’t fucking do that again! I’ll fucking kill you!”

He glanced up at the other kids, who were staring at him. Finally, Zoomer said, gesturing towards the flashlight, “I underestimated how badass that looked!”

Mike smirked, flipping the flashlight and staring down at the woman he’d just knocked out cold. “Glad to know that my weapon of choice is useful. Now, where’s Will?”

“Hopper said he’s safe.” Dragonfire reported.

“You’ve seen Hopper?” Mike asked.

“He’s coming back for us, probably.” Cyclone added.

“Fucking great. And now he’ll know we’re here.” Mike muttered.

“Not if we get a move on.” Zoomer said, finally managing to stumble forwards.

Dragonfire asked Zoomer, “Think you can run?”

“Not far. But if we start now, we can get a head start on the Chief.”

Cyclone shrugged. “Sounds like a solid plan.”

“You think Hopper will be worried that we’re gone?” Dragonfire added.

“Here, I’ll leave a fucking note.” Zoomer said, gesturing to a pad of paper on the counter. Mike rushed over and grabbed it, tossing it and a pen to her. She scribbled something and slammed it on the table, and then said, “Let’s fucking go.”

They rushed out, with El taking the lead.

Hopper did eventually come back, finding the notepad with the simple note:

Gone Leavin’ (Again) :D

“Goddamnit.”

33. The Lab is now full of Angry Soldiers and Angrier Children

Notes for the Chapter:

Update on the Part II situation: it will definitely be a bit shorter than Part I, at least at the pace I'm going. However, hopefully Part III will make up for it: that one's going to be LONG.

Love you all! :D

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The Lab is now full of Angry Soldiers and Angrier Children

“It took us fucking long enough to get here,” Steve said, staring down at the Lab. “If we hadn’t taken that wrong turn.”

“I apologized for that.” Jonathan rolled his eyes.

“*-and stopped for our weapons of choice... Nance?*”

The girl was staring ahead, transfixed, at the sight in front of them; they could see Hawkins Lab, with its alarms going off and a hole in the fence, and the image seemed to scare Nancy a bit more than the boys. After a moment, Jonathan grabbed Nancy’s arm. “Are you okay?”

Nancy took a breath, shaking slightly, and said, “That alarm. They’ve spotted someone.”

After a second, Jonathan said, “Nance, is that...?”

They glanced down towards the fence; out of thin air, three people had appeared. “Mom?” Jonathan finished, looking down at the figures as they climbed through a gaping hole. He focused a little more, and then took off at a run, yelling, “Will!”

“Jonathan, wait!” Nancy called, rushing after him.

Steve threw his arms into the air, yelling, “What the fuck, guys? What about the plan?” After a minute, he sighed and followed them.

“Mom!”

Joyce, Will and Kali all looked up, and Kali instantly moved in front of Will, reaching for the gun in her pocket in case the three teenagers running at them were a threat. Will was still gripping onto Joyce’s arm, and was trying to duck under Kali to see what was going on.

“Jonathan?” Joyce said as Jonathan slid to a stop in front of them.

“Jonathan!” Will stumbled around Kali, rushing forwards to hug his brother around the legs. Kali eyed him, as well as Nancy and Steve, who rushed up to stand next to their friend.

“Will! Will, oh my God, are you okay?” Jonathan said, pulling away and crouching down to get eye-level with his brother. “What did they do to you?”

“It’s okay, I’m out, I...” Will shook his head. “I’m sorry I scared you, I-”

“Will, really? You’re apologizing for getting kidnapped?” Jonathan let out a little laugh. “Will, it’s fine, it’s okay. You’re safe now.”

“Who’s this?” Nancy asked, looking to Kali.

“Who are *you*?” Kali retorted, still glaring at her.

“Why are you here?” Will asked, looking between Nancy and Steve.

“Uh, this is Eight, she helped Will.” Joyce said. “What are you kids-”

“My name’s Kali.” Kali interrupted, and then she turned to the teenagers. “What are you here for?”

“Well, we were *going* to be your distraction, but it looks like you’re

already out.” Steve said. “Maybe if we hadn’t gotten *lost*—”

“The others are still there.” Will said.

“Others?” Nancy asked, staring down at him in horror. “What others?”

“My friends.” Will answered.

“Those little shits.” Steve muttered.

“Are you sure it’s them?” Nancy asked.

Will considered. “I... I heard a girl in my head? She said she knew Mike.”

“Oh, fuck, he cracked.” Steve said, and Jonathan and Joyce both gave him death glares as a response.

Kali, however, looked down at him. “What was her name?”

Will paused, and then said, “She said ‘El.’”

“El? She talked to you?” Joyce asked.

As Will nodded, Kali considered for a second, and then her eyes went wide. “I’m going in. Take care of Will.” she announced, and then she immediately turned and rushed back into the building.

“Kali!” Joyce called, turning around.

“I’ll get her.” Nancy said, shooting the boys a meaningful glance. “Jonathan, stay with Will. Steve, are you coming?”

Steve nodded, and Nancy instantly took off running. “Oh, shit.” he said, rushing after her. “Bye, Ms. Byers!”

The Byers watched them run off, and then Will said, “Wh-what’s going on? What did you guys do while I was gone?”

“Keep going, the stairs are this way.” Mike said, stepping over a

body.

While El followed him closely, the other kids stared at the unconscious men. “What happened?” Dragonfire asked.

“El happened.” Mike said, glancing back at them with a smile. “She’s a badass.”

“Badass?” El asked.

“It means you’re *awesome*.” Zoomer smirked; she was finally able to walk on her own, but still seemed slightly dizzy.

El smiled at that, turning back to Mike. “Badass.” she repeated.

Mike finally opened up a door, revealing the staircase. “Come on, let’s get going.” he said. “Max, can you run?”

“I could go into speedmode, but I’d probably pass out in five minutes.” Zoomer shrugged. “I’m gonna be honest, the room’s still kinda spinning a little. I don’t know what was *in* that wakeup call, but at least I’m not seeing stars again.”

“We’ve gotta get out fast,” Cyclone said, holding open the door as everyone rushed past. “The cameras’ll be turning on soon, and they’ll be able to tell where we are.”

“The alarms went off a while ago, maybe they’ll be dealing with whatever that is?” Dragonfire suggested.

“Still a bad idea to stick around.” Cyclone rushed forwards to catch up to Zoomer and Dragonfire. Mike was leading them down, jumping from step to step to try and reach the first floor as fast as possible. El, meanwhile, brought up the rear, glancing back on occasion and wringing her hands, preparing to fight anyone who came at them.

They rushed down stairs, trying to ignore the alarms and trying to focus on the path outside. As they stopped at one landing, however, Mike held up his hand, listening intently. They could hear faint footsteps below them- *fuck*. He moved to listen at the door, focusing.

“There are people on the other side.” he finally said. “But it’s go out

this way, fight on the stairs, or go back *up*. So, who wants to go first?”

“I’ll shoot an energy blast to distract the men on the other side of the door. You and El get somewhere safe.” Dragonfire said. “Max, you-”

Zoomer punched him in the shoulder. “I’m not fucking going anywhere. I’m gonna find a closet and something to bash their heads in with.”

“You can have the flashlight.” Mike offered, tossing it to her.

Zoomer caught it and smirked at him. “Nice to know it was useful.”

Mike nodded at her, and then backed into the corner, with El cautiously moving to stand by him. After a second, Dragonfire glanced at the others, gave some sort of signal that Cyclone understood and Zoomer didn’t, and then he burst open the door, sending out an energy blast and then rushing out. Cyclone and Zoomer followed upon hearing the yelling.

After a second, Mike said, “We’ll duck out into the hall and make a run for that room you destroyed. It’s on this floor, I think, and pretty close, we can hide out there. If they aim for us, I... I can shield us.”

El shook her head at him. “You don’t need to.”

“Yeah, well, I can try.” he said, holding out his hand for her. “Ready to run?”

El nodded, and they both took off.

“Duck!”

El froze, confused, as Mike grabbed her shoulders and pushed her down. A shot of lightning hit the wall above them, and after a second, Mike let go. “Sorry.”

They ducked around another corner, finally reaching a currently empty spot, and Mike said, “The room’s this way. You gonna be okay

in there?"

"Are you?"

Mike bit his lip. "Yeah. Yeah, of course."

They stared at each other for a bit, and then El said, "I could help."

"Those guys are after you. We want to get you as far away from them as we can."

El nodded, staring down at the ground. After a second, Mike peered around the corner, eyes focused on the fight, as El turned towards the hall leading to the room. He watched for a minute or two, staring at the energy and lightning shooting around the room.

"They... they seem to be doing okay." Mike announced, watching as Zoomer jumped on top of a man, repeatedly hitting his head with the flashlight. "I think we're good to go."

He turned, and suddenly froze.

He was alone.

"El?"

El had heard a noise in the room.

She knew the room well; her powers were tested there. To see if she could find people. To see if she could crush things. To see if she could *hurt* things. She'd always hated that room, but when she'd seen it earlier that day, she'd been filled with such cold fury that her only thought had been to destroy that place.

But now something was moving inside.

She turned down a couple of halls, trying to follow the sound, a faint hope rising and falling with each step that maybe the sound had come from a different place, or that it came from Will or Hopper or Eight.

By the time she'd turned the corner to the Testing Room, that hope had died. There was a sound inside, of someone moving the pieces of table and wires. Bracing herself, El approached the room, keeping her hand up in case she would have to fight. She hesitated by the door, glancing over her shoulder to see if anyone was behind her. She felt a quick pang of guilt for leaving Mike behind, but... well, she didn't want to bring him right into trouble when she could take care of it herself.

El grabbed the doorknob, feeling the cold metal under her fingers, and then she swung the door open.

She looked into the room, and instantly dropped her fighting stance; instead, she froze in place, a dark dread keeping her still.

From behind the glass, Papa turned to stare at her.

34. Brenner is an Asshole

Notes for the Chapter:

Ooh, you can always tell it's going to be a fun chapter when I have to put a trigger warning ahead of it. But, yeah: More Panic Attacks/Flashbacks incoming. And once again: if I misrepresent anything, let me know and I'll change it.

And once again, thanks for your comments! Love you all!

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Brenner is an Asshole

El could only stand there and stare. She didn't know if her fear was showing on her face or if she'd just turned blank; either option was possible. She met Papa's eyes, feeling a panic setting in as every possible feeling she could have exploded inside her.

They were silent for a minute, and then Papa gestured to the corner of the room, where he'd been stacking pieces of what she'd broken. "Did you do this, Eleven?"

El didn't answer, still unable to make herself move. She just stared at Papa for what felt like forever. Was she happy to see him? Scared? Sad? Did she feel guilty, relieved, angry? She didn't know what she was feeling, let alone what she should *do*.

Papa started walking closer, passing through the doorway and beyond the glass. "Have you come back to us?"

He stopped just a few feet away from her, and then asked, "Or are you here for Eight?"

Something in El's head said *He doesn't know I know about Will*, but she wasn't sure what that meant or how she could use that. What she was

sure of was that she still *couldn't move*.

"Eight's running around the halls and killing our men." he said. "Without remorse or mercy. Do you think that's fair? They all have lives, Eleven, lives and families. But, then again, you did the same thing as her at the Arcade, didn't you?"

He knows about the Arcade.

"Did you think there were no casualties there?"

He stepped closer again, close enough to her. He glanced down at her outfit, saying, "Did those boys do this to you?"

He knows about the boys. He knows about the boys. He knows about the boys!

"They're misguided, Eleven. They're lost, but we can help them. We can take care of them here."

El's breath caught in her throat as Papa knelt down, getting eye-level with her. "Come back to us. We will overlook what you've done the last few days, so long as you stay with us. Wouldn't you like that? To go back to the Safety we offer?"

She was silently crying now, and she couldn't decide on why. A sinking feeling was building in her stomach, and she wondered if maybe that would be easier. To not have to run. To stay safe.

But the Lab wasn't safe. She was punished by Solitary, others were punished by shocks, and children were grabbed off the streets and forced away from their friends.

Did they grab her, too? She'd never thought about where she'd been before the Lab. Did she have a family? If they hadn't taken her, would she have had her own friends? Her own life?

But she had friends now. She had a *family* now. And the Lab was trying to take her back, to hide her again, to take her *friends away*.

And if Papa thought he was going to take her friends away, he was wrong.

She slowly shook her head, stepping back. “No.” she whispered. “No. Bad. *Bad!*”

Papa’s eyes narrowed. “Eleven.”

“No!” El was yelling now, retreating faster, shaking her head. “No! *Never again!*”

And then she heard a voice behind her.

“El?”

And all of the sudden, all of her fear returned full-force.

No.

El slowly turned, to see that Mike was at the edge of the hall. He was staring at her, and slowly, his eyes went up to Papa. Immediately, he started forwards, yelling, “G-get away from her!”

El whipped around, looking back to Papa, only to see something she didn’t expect. Not only was he barely reacting, he had a spark in his eyes as he looked at Mike, a spark that made Mike stop dead in his tracks only halfway down the hall.

It took El a minute to realize that it was a spark of recognition.

There was silence, as Mike stopped at stared in confusion and horror, and as El wondered if she could get closer to him, get farther from Papa.

“Is this one of those boys, Eleven?”

El tried shaking her head, but the fear in her eyes gave it away.

“Leave her alone.” Mike said, his voice breaking slightly.

“I must say,” Papa said, very slowly, “I thought you might come here, but I didn’t think it would be because of her.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?” Mike said.

Instead of responding, Papa moved past El, walking instead to Mike.

The boy tried to move backwards, but only stumbled a little before stopping again, still looking terrified.

“Leave me *alone!*” Mike yelled. “*Get away from me!*”

Papa stopped for a second, and that was all El needed. She let out a scream and flew her hands out, and he was sent down the hall, crashing into the wall.

There was a tense silence as both children stared at him- he seemed to be knocked out, or... El preferred to think he was knocked out. And after a minute, Mike slowly turned to her.

“El?” he said shakily. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, slowly moving back to him. She stood in front of him for a second, and then she hugged him again, trying to hide the fear that was still on her face. He hugged her back, shaking, and said, “Who was that? El, did he hurt you? What did he want from you? What did he want from *us*? ”

Before she could respond, she heard another noise. She opened her eyes, and she tensed herself up, gripping onto Mike’s jacket.

There were more people running towards them.

“El?” Mike asked. Could he hear them? Or did he just feel her stiffening? Did he even know something was wrong?

She saw people run into the hall, leaping over Papa. They had guns, pointed at them.

El let out a scream, grabbing onto Mike and pushing him down as the guns fired. They managed to miss the bullets, and as El screamed, the guns flew into the wall, and the men dropped to the ground.

And then something worse happened.

She didn’t know if it was the bullets, or the flying guns, or her powers. Whatever it was, she blamed herself.

Because something flew past the open door and into the room.

And it hit the glass.

And the glass shattered.

And Mike screamed.

Zoomer tapped Dragonfire on the shoulder. “I think I might be able to run you guys out.” she said.

There was a pause in the fight, as the soldiers had all either been knocked out of the fight or had retreated to get reinforcements. And they needed to get out before that happened.

“Okay. Get Mike and El, and we’ll get out of here.” he said.

Zoomer raced down the hall, as Dragonfire rushed over to Cyclone, grabbing his arm. “You okay?”

“I’m tired as fuck, but otherwise fine.” he sighed. “Those guys just don’t give up, huh?”

“Hey?” Zoomer called back, and the boys turned to look at her at the end of the hall. “Guys? Mike and El aren’t here.”

“*What?*”

At that moment, they heard a voice behind them.

“*What the fuck?*”

They turned, to see Nancy and Steve, staring at them.

“What are you doing here?” Steve asked.

“Getting the kid out.” Dragonfire responded quickly.

“He’s out.” Nancy said. “Have you seen a girl with purple hair run by?”

They shook their heads, and Nancy said, “Okay, well, get yourselves out. This place isn’t gonna last very long.”

Despite that ominous warning, the kids all yelled, “No!”

“Our friends are still here!” Zoomer said.

“There are more of you?” Steve asked.

“Not *exactly*.” Cyclone shrugged.

“Wait.” Nancy said, raising a hand. “Is my *brother* here?”

There was a long pause, and then Cyclone said, “If your brother is Mike Wheeler, then—”

“Fuck.” Nancy sighed, and then she turned back to the kids. “Alright. Go find him, and then get the hell out. This place is going in two minutes.”

“What’s happening to it?” Dragonfire asked.

Nancy gave him a grim look, and then said, “Get out.”

Mike was lost again.

He could feel the cold metal under his fingers as he grabbed the railing to rush down the stairs, he could hear Nancy yelling at him to come back, could hear himself yell back that they’d be fine. Or maybe he just thought it. He didn’t know anymore.

Because then he entered the room, and he saw the glass, and he walked to it, despite the fact his mind was screeching for him to stop, despite the fact his heart was pounding faster and faster, despite the fact that he wanted to drop to the ground and sob.

He might be crying on the ground. He didn’t know. But he could hear the glass shatter, and he could feel the heat and pain in his skin, and he couldn’t even scream.

“Mike! Mike!”

Nancy was screaming. She could see him on fire, could see him

bleeding and sobbing and *dying*.

“Mike!”

Although that didn’t sound like Nancy’s voice. But she was the only other one there... *right* ?

“Mike, look! Look at me!”

But I can’t.

“Can you feel your jacket?”

My...

“You’re holding your jacket.”

Mike didn’t have a jacket. They were dressed for summer and didn’t expect it to rain. That’s why they had to hide.

So why do I feel a jacket?

“Mike, I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

That wasn’t Nancy’s voice. Who else was there? It was just him and Nancy and...

“Look at me. Look at me.”

Slowly, Mike opened his eyes. And he didn’t see a shed, or a burning room, or even a Hospital.

He saw her.

She was blurry- he couldn’t see her very well. But she was close enough that he could tell who it was.

“Mike?”

El.

“Mike, I’m sorry. Are you okay?”

He was crying. That's why he couldn't see her clearly. He didn't know how to stop the tears streaming down his face, how he'd started crying in the first place. What was going on? Where were they?

"Mike? Mike?"

Was she crying, too?

"Wh-where...?" Mike managed to ask.

El let out a shaky smile upon seeing that he could talk, and she said. "Closet. We floated here. Locked."

Why were they in a closet?

"Sorry. I'm sorry."

"What...?"

"Glass. Glass broke and..." El choked back more tears, and then said, "You screamed."

Flashback.

More things started coming back to him. The man that El had thrown into the wall. Her tensing up mid-hug as she heard something. Bullets flying over their heads.

Something had shattered the glass.

Goddamnit.

He'd freaked out. He'd freaked out and she'd had to lock him in a closet. What if someone had attacked El? He wouldn't have been able to do *anything*.

"I'm sorry." Mike choked out, tears still streaming down his face.

El shook her head. "My fault... my fault..."

"No! No!" Mike said. "I... I freaked..."

"I broke the glass."

“They attacked.”

They stared for a second, and then El asked quietly, “Their fault?”

Mike sighed. “That’ll... that’ll work...” He was still crying. Why couldn’t he just *stop*? Why couldn’t he calm down?

El hesitantly grabbed his hand. She didn’t hug him, not yet. He was still panicking, and too much unexpected contact might set him off again. But her hand against his felt... comforting. Calming.

He turned to look at her, staring into her eyes.

“We n-need to go.” he said.

“Can you?”

“We need-”

It was then that they heard a muffled blast, and they heard Max scream.

It had been going well.

Zoomer thought she remembered Mike saying something about a room El destroyed, and she eventually led the kids down several halls, trying to find it.

“They’ve gotta be on this floor!” she said.

“We’ll find them.” Dragonfire said, trying to keep calm.

Zoomer kicked down a door, rushing inside to find the light. Dragonfire and Cyclone followed her hesitantly, glancing around the drawers and tables. It looked like another storage room.

“What do you think Nancy meant?” Cyclone asked, peering into a drawer. “That the building’s getting destroyed? You don’t think she has a bomb, do you?”

“Where the *hell* would Nancy get a bomb?” Dragonfire asked.

Zoomer opened a drawer while still searching for the switch, pulling out a file and flipping through it, struggling to see the images through the low lighting. “Wait. Ms. Byers was taking Jonathan to the Chief... you don’t think she took the other teens, too?”

“And wouldn’t the Chief have bombs?” Cyclone asked.

“The Chief wouldn’t have *bombs* laying around his house!” Dragonfire groaned. “Honestly, you’re just-”

At that moment, the previously ignored door slammed shut.

The kids whipped around, staring at it.

“Did you close the door?” Dragonfire asked the other two, knowing full well what their answer was going to be.

“Did you?” Cyclone said shakily.

“It was probably nothing, don’t worry about it.” Dragonfire said, rushing towards the door. “After all, if it was Lab guys, they’d pull guns on us instead of just closing a door.”

At that moment, Zoomer found the lightswitch. And as she flipped it on, she saw the papers she held in her hands. “What the fuck...?” she muttered, skimming the words.

Dragonfire moved to the door, trying to pull it open. It was locked.

“Shit. I think they went under lockdown!” he yelled.

Cyclone jumped up, trying to see through the small window on the door. “What’s out there?” he asked.

Zoomer flipped the pages. They looked like files on powered kids, all with red markings at the bottom- what did that mean?

She flipped the page, and stared at the attached photo.

“Guys...?” she called, glancing up.

As they turned to her, they heard something from above them. They

looked up, hearing a low rumble.

“What the...?” Dragonfire began.

At that moment, the ceiling gave way.

Zoomer could only let out a loud scream before the rubble hit them.

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey, I just wanted to thank you guys again. And wanted to let you know that I do intend to update tomorrow, but it depends on how well our wifi works. If I don't update, just know that I really do want to. Thanks for understanding, love you!

35. Mike and El do their first Couples Project

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Mike and El do their first Couples Project

Nancy and Steve were racing down the hall.

“Think they’ll find him in time?” he asked.

“No. That’s why we’re delaying.” Nancy replied, turning around a bend.

“Delaying?”

“We’re going to set off parts, instead of all at once.”

“And what if those kids are in those parts?”

“They’re Powered.” Nancy shrugged, glancing away. “They’ll find a way out.”

It was at that moment where they turned the corner, only to see several soldiers running towards them.

“Steve!” Nancy yelled.

Steve threw out his hands, and the men instantly flew up into the air, gravity lost on them. As they screamed, Nancy turned to Steve.

“What’s the plan?” Steve asked.

Nancy took a deep breath. “Hope those kids are already out.”

At that, she pulled an item from her pocket, threw it to the ground, and her and Steve rushed out of the hall.

The second they were gone, the floor rumbled, and then exploded.

“Max!”

Mike whipped around to face the noise, terror spreading across his face. “What happened? What happened to the others?”

El jumped to her feet. “Wrong.” she said, shaking her head. “Something’s wrong.”

“We need to help them! I need to help! I can help!”

He tried to stand up, but El turned around, grabbing his hands and shaking her head. “No!”

“I can *help-*”

He looked up into her face, still struggling to see through his own sobs. She was worried. Of course. Of course she was worried.

“I have to help.” he said quietly. “Please, I have to help them.”

El stared at him for a second, and then said, “I want to... transform. If you transform, will your powers make you...?”

Mike bit his lip. He doubted that so much energy from his powers would be a *good* thing, but... he had to help his friends. And if he could use his forcefields to do that...

“Let’s try together.” he finally said, wiping his tears on his sleeve.

El hesitated. “You’ll be okay?”

“I can’t get any worse.”

“That’s not okay.”

Mike sighed. “Just... I need to try.”

El bit her lip, and then grabbed Mike’s hand. As he looked up at her, she said, “If you panic, look at me. I’ll be here.”

I’ll be here.

Mike nodded, and slowly stood up, releasing her hand once he was

on his feet. He sighed, and then said, “Lucas and Dustin said we need a lot of energy in one place.”

El nodded, holding her hands out, palms facing each other. She then shut her eyes, and Mike could see a small current of air circling between her fingers.

So now he had to try.

He bit his lip, opting to keep his eyes open instead of shutting them and hoping for the best. He stared down at his palms, thinking that maybe with all this forewarning, he might be able to use his powers well. He'd done it when El needed to find Will. He could do it again. To save the others.

He made his palms face together, and then he thought, *I need a Field.*

He saw the strands burst from his fingers, circling themselves into a small field. He started to breathe faster, the warmth he was feeling starting to spread. He tried to focus on the Field, tried to focus on the powers and not the terror starting to build, the terror that he'd only just escaped.

And he looked up at El. She was staring at him, and they locked eyes.

She was there.

He tried to slow his breathing as the power started to build, and suddenly the warmth shooting up his arms felt more... natural. Calming. It felt less like burning and more like... like being *charged*.

“Is this right?” he asked quietly, his voice still shaking.

El shrugged, her own power still flitting between her fingers. “Arms are warm.” she said.

“That's... probably good.” Mike took a deep breath. “Let's try to bring them together, and then see if we don't blow up the closet.”

El considered. “What did... Lucas say? On Three?”

Mike smiled, still forcing himself to breathe slowly, still feeling his

heart pound in his chest. If he was being honest with himself, he was still terrified.

But he couldn't be. He had to help his friends.

I can do this.

"One." he said.

I can protect her.

"Two." she said.

No... we'll protect each other.

"Three!"

They forced their fists together, and then there was a flash.

And suddenly, everything was different.

Cyclone opened his eyes, trying to see through the dust. He could hear the alarms much louder now, and there were people yelling. It looked like the ceiling had given way, as well as part of the wall; however, a good chunk of it behind him seemed to be left. He tried to sit up, only to fall onto his back. Something was pinning his legs down.

"Fuck..." he muttered, and then he yelled, "Dragon! Zoomer! Are you there?"

He heard a muffled, "Here!" from a few feet away. He sighed and glanced down, seeing a piece of the ceiling had fallen onto him. It looked like it had hit him after it had fallen from the ceiling- perhaps crashed onto its side, fell, and slid onto him. That was good; it meant his legs had a better chance of working.

He put his hands under the rubble, trying to lift. Shit, he wasn't strong at all. He yelled again, "Are you okay?" to whoever had responded.

“Making my way over! How’re you?” That was Dragonfire’s voice.

“Could be better.”

He heard a crash behind him, and Zoomer yelled, “Shit! Sorry!”

“Zoomer? You okay?”

“Fuck no! A fucking pile of *shit* fell on me!”

Shit. “I’m a little better off.” Cyclone called. “Just got my legs pinned.”

“*Fuck!*” Cyclone finally caught sight of Dragonfire, who jumped over some rubble, rushing towards him. “Are your legs okay? Can you feel them?”

Cyclone glanced down. “Yeah. They hurt, but I don’t think they’re broken. Just stuck.”

“Well, fuck me, then!” Zoomer called. “My leg feels like someone took a chainsaw to it!”

“Shit, lemme get Dustin, then we’ll help you!” Dragonfire yelled, dropping down in front of his friend. “Okay, I’m gonna use my energy to lift the rubble. I’m gonna need you to move as fast as you can, okay?”

“Are you alright?” Cyclone asked. “You seem tired?”

“Of course you’re asking if *I’m* alright while you’re pinned under ceiling bits.” Dragonfire rolled his eyes and held out his hands. Cyclone felt a bit of heat beside him, and saw red energy rise from the ground, lifting the rubble into the air. Cyclone rushed away, mainly using his arms to push himself back, and after a second, the rubble fell again, shaking the floor a little. Dragonfire bent over, putting his hands on his knees and breathing hard.

“Dude, are you *sure*-”

“I’m *fine*, we have to find Max.”

“Over here, dipshits!” Zoomer called. “Hurry up before more soldiers arrive!”

“More?” Cyclone asked as Dragonfire helped him to his feet; standing kind of hurt, but he wasn’t sure he could crawl his way through the mess around them.

“There are some bodies here- must’ve fallen from the last floor. I think they’re unconscious but I’m not gonna look too close to find out!”

Cyclone stumbled over some more rubble, eventually climbing over another piece of ceiling before he could spot her. “Shit!” he yelled upon seeing her, and Dragonfire managed to rush past him, worry stretching across his face.

Zoomer was completely pinned underneath a piece of ceiling, and she did *not* look good. Dragonfire said, “Are you okay? Can you feel your legs?”

“Told you, asshole, they feel like they just got crushed by the fucking ceiling.” Zoomer rolled her eyes. “Do you think they’ll feel better or worse if I detransform?”

“Worse. Definitely worse.” Cyclone said. “We learned *that* lesson, didn’t we, Dragon?”

Dragonfire gave him a dark glare and then said, “Not now, Cy. We need to get this off of her and get her the *hell* out of here.”

“What about Mike and El?” Zoomer asked.

“We’ll find them.” Cyclone said, before turning to Dragonfire. “Right?”

While the other boy nodded, and kneeled down to try and lift the rubble, Cyclone dropped next to her and said, “Don’t freak out. You’re gonna be okay.”

“Oh, that’s comforting.” Zoomer glared at him. “Doesn’t scare me at all.”

“Can the sarcasm, I’ve gotta focus.” Dragonfire said.

He shut his eyes, trying to focus as red energy started to lift the rubble. However, after it only lifted a few inches, the energy stalled, holding it in place.

Cyclone let out a gasp and instantly grabbed Zoomer, dragging her away as the energy disappeared and Dragonfire collapsed. Cyclone and Zoomer took only two seconds to breathe before Cyclone rushed over to Dragonfire. Zoomer tried to get up, only to scream once pressure was put on her legs. Cyclone dragged Dragonfire closer to her, saying, “He’s not waking up! He’s-”

Zoomer pushed herself closer, grabbing Dragonfire’s face. “Lucas!” she called. “Lucas, come on, wake up!”

“He used too much energy, he’s shut down.” Cyclone said, trying to reassure her that nothing worse had happened. “Hopefully he’ll wake up soon-”

“Wake the *fuck* up, you little shit!” Zoomer yelled, grabbing Dragonfire and hugging him to her. “Wake *up* !” She looked up at Cyclone, and then asked, “How long until he wakes up?”

“I don’t know,” Cyclone admitted. “Will passed out a couple times, but Lucas hasn’t ever...”

He trailed off, turning around to face behind them. Footsteps were running in their direction.

“Can’t we just getting a *fucking break* for *five fucking minutes?*” Zoomer yelled, clutching Dragonfire closer to her.

Cyclone glanced at her; she didn’t look like she’d move for a while. Dragonfire was still knocked out. He wouldn’t be able to carry both of them.

He shut his eyes, and said, “We’re gonna stay here. I’ll fight, you protect Lucas until he wakes up.”

“Wha- Dustin-”

“We can’t move you, I’ll fight until-”

“How tired are *you*? ”

Cyclone paused, still not looking at her. He didn’t exactly want to admit that his legs felt like rocks and his eyes kept threatening to close and send him off to sleep.

“Dustin, if you both get knocked out, we’re fucking dead.”

“What other choice do we have? ”

She fell silent, and Dustin positioned himself in front of her, holding out his hands, feeling shocks slide down his arm and into his fingers, charging and preparing to shoot all the lightning he could towards anyone who would dare to hurt his friends.

Only, after a second, he heard men yelling, and thuds against the wall. It creaked as it was hit, and Dustin turned to stare at that area.

“Maybe that was Hopper? ” Zoomer suggested. “Or Nancy and Steve? ”

Dustin still held his position, considering. If someone was attacking the soldiers, then they could be friendly. But at the same time, he wasn’t going to take any chances.

After a few seconds, the thuds and yelling stopped. And he heard more footsteps heading towards the break in the wall- it sounded like just two people. Dustin swerved a little to face that area, waiting.

And then out stepped two kids, holding hands and looking ahead.

They stopped just short of the others, staring at the others.

And then the boy said, “Jesus, Dustin, what the fuck happened? ”

36. The Party splits up, because when has that been a bad idea?

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The Party splits up, because when has that been a bad idea?

Being transformed was... it was *freeing*.

Whenever he'd seen the energy shoot up his friends' arms, Mike had assumed that would hurt him. He couldn't imagine energy wouldn't be hot, and he didn't quite like the idea of burning alive again.

But instead of heat, he felt soft energy shoot up his arm as his body changed. And behind the energy, a comforting warmth spread, keeping his arms heated at a comfortable temperature. The heat finally stopped at his neck, but he felt a nice feeling around his eyes, too- that must be the mask.

And all of the sudden, he felt *alive*.

He felt as if before, everything inside of him had been dark and still and closed off. But the second he'd transformed, it was like a light switch had been flicked on, and suddenly energy and joy and life had flooded back into him. He took in a breath, a smile spreading across his face.

El looked up at him, confusion mixing with her own happiness, and he had to freeze for a second upon seeing her.

God, she was *beautiful*.

Her mask was a full masquerade-style, including the flowery designs on the edges; the center of the mask was a pitch-black, which faded into pink around the end. She had what seemed to be a thick, pale-pink dress starting at her neck and ending just above her knees, fanning out around her, and she had black leggings underneath it. Her pink shoes looked similar to converse, but seemed to glow

slightly, and her fingers were covered by sparkly black gloves.

He let out a shaky laugh- why was it shaky? Oh, yeah, he'd just been crying. He'd been sobbing only a minute ago, and now he felt so good.

"Pretty." he finally said.

El finally allowed herself an ecstatic smile, and she beamed at him. "Pretty." she replied.

It took Mike a second to realize that she was directing a compliment towards him, and he glanced down at himself. He was dressed in gold and brown swirls, with longer gloves than El but similar shoes, slightly darker than the rest of his outfit. He couldn't see the mask, but he felt its warmth. He reached up, running a hand through his hair; it felt curlier than usual. "Thanks." he said.

El let out a small giggle, before she bit her lip and said, "Let's go?"

Mike suddenly remembered the reason they'd transformed; they had to find the others. They'd probably just wasted a minute just staring at each other. He nodded, and as El unlocked the door, he moved forwards to open it, holding it open. "After you, Ms. El." he said.

"Ms?"

"Nevermind."

As they left the room, Mike said, "Think you can find the others?"

El pointed. "Scream was that way."

"That's a good starting point."

The two started running; unfortunately, after only turning a hall, they heard more people rushing around.

"Probably heard the scream, too." Mike muttered, ducking behind a wall. "And the crumbling. Okay, El, you think you can throw them around?"

El nodded flexing her hands. “I feel... strong.”

Mike smiled. “Me, too. I’ll be there to protect you; I’ll try and throw up a shield if they turn on you.”

El faltered, glancing up at him. “Will you be okay?”

“El, I haven’t felt this good since before the accident.” Mike said honestly, smiling. “And if you’re with me, I can do anything.”

El grinned at him, and then said, “Then...” she paused considered. “Like Dustin said. Let’s fuck shit up.”

Mike let out a laugh, and grabbed her hand. “Let’s fuck shit up!”

And they rushed out.

The first thing Mike noticed, once they finally reached the hall where people were, was that the ceiling had given way, and farther down the hall, part of the wall had collapsed.

The second thing he noticed was soldiers were rushing down the hall, probably excited that they finally had an idea where they should go.

Mike only let himself look for a second, before he ducked behind El and let her throw out her hands. Soldiers fell back onto each other, tossed into the air. They turned towards El, and instinctively, Mike threw up his hands.

As the forcefield surrounded them, Mike felt a quick burst of panic. He took in a gasp, his eyes going wide. Shit. Shit. *Shit. Shit! Shit!* He was panicking again. He started to breathe heavily, starting to shut his eyes to try and block out everything around him.

That was when El gripped his hand, repeating, “Here. I’m here. I’m here.”

Mike gripped her hand, holding one hand out to keep the shield up. He tried to feel her, trying to keep himself in the present.

“Drop it.” El said, and Mike dropped his hand, letting the shield fall as El threw more men around, and he grabbed his jacket with his now-free hand, managing to pull himself back to reality.

He thought it would’ve been different. He thought the transformation would’ve helped...

Then again, he’d pulled out of his panic faster than he had before.

Maybe a large shield wasn’t the best place to start. He’d made little wisps before- maybe he could do it again.

And he didn’t yet know what those wisps could do.

He glanced over at the men that El was still tossing around, and threw out his hands. The strands of light shot from his palm, leaping towards the soldiers, and once it hit them, they exploded into light showers. The men let out yells at that, and Mike thought he felt a bit of heat.

Fucking nice!

El shot him a grin and grabbed one of his hands, using her other to direct her powers against more men. Mike used his free hand to shoot more stands, the fear in his chest slowly falling the more he got used to it. He could do this. He could *do this*.

The second that all the soldiers were down, Mike whispered, “We should check in there,” and he cocked his head towards the rubble from where part of the building collapsed. “I can think of several reasons someone would scream in there.”

El nodded, still gripping his hand, and the two of them moved towards the break in the wall, getting ready to go in.

They only paused for a second, before turning the bend, looking inside.

Shit.

Up ahead, Cyclone was standing on two shaking feet, looking like a gust of wind could blow him over. Behind him, Mike could glimpse

Max clutching onto an unconscious Lucas, with her own legs bleeding and at least one of them looking bent in a very wrong way.

“Jesus, Dustin,” Mike said, “What the *fuck* happened?”

The kids all stared at Mike for a minute, and then he remembered the whole “transformation disguise” thing. “Shit. Shit. Sorry, uh... Hi. It’s Mike. And El. El, say ‘hi.’”

El waved. “Hello.”

There was another second, and then Cyclone said, “Shit, Wheeler, you scared the *fuck* out of me!”

“What happened to you guys?” Mike asked, moving forwards and trying to step over the rubble, with El still gripping his hand and following closely.

“Max’s legs are hurt from the ceiling fall,” Cyclone explained, “And Lucas knocked himself out with power overuse.”

“That’s a thing?”

“Yep.”

The two of them made it over to the others, and Mike said, “Okay. Okay, El, can you lift Max, Dustin, you take Lucas, and we’ll get the *fuck* out of here. I can protect you if need me.”

“You don’t need to-”

“Dustin.” Mike said, giving him a dark glare. “I *will* protect you if need be. I fucking transformed, I can handle a few steps out of the-”

The floor shook as a blast sounded from the far side of the building. Zoomer let out a screech, and the others whipped around, staring at each other.

“We have to get out *now*.” Mike said quickly. “Come on, let’s-”

“What’s going on?”

They all looked down, to see Dragonfire blinking his eyes open, squinting a little. He spoke very slowly, as if he wasn't quite awake yet. "Who's that?"

"Lucas!" Zoomer cheered, gripping him closer. "Lucas, thank God!"

"What's going on?"

"You knocked yourself out, buddy. Stay calm, we're getting out." Cyclone explained.

Dragonfire turned to Mike and El, still looking confused.

"Lucas, it's us! It's Mike and El." Mike said.

Dragonfire blinked at them, and then said, "Good job."

"Thanks." Mike said. "Now, get some rest. El'll help you out- if that's okay?" El nodded. "Alright, we'll handle it."

"N-no, I can-" Dragonfire tried to move, and immediately fell down again.

"Take a nap, Dragon." Zoomer said, reaching out to help him sit up. "We're getting the fuck out of here."

After a second, however, Dragonfire flew up into the air. He turned, looking blankly at El as she lifted him, and after a second, El threw another hand out, letting some of the rubble fly up, too, clearing them a path. Mike gave her an encouraging smile, as Cyclone moved to pick up Zoomer. As soon as he did, Mike said, "Everyone stay close, and go fast."

They rushed down the hallways, with El levitating Dragonfire beside her and Mike staying in the front, flexing his hands just in case. They could hear more explosions and crashes behind them; whatever was happening, it was happening *fast*.

Unfortunately, the explosions caught up to them.

They only barely turned a bend in one corner when they saw the ceiling collapse before them, blocking off their exit.

“Shit!” Cyclone yelled, immediately turning to shield Zoomer from the debris.

“What are we going to do?” Zoomer yelled.

“It’s okay, keep calm.” Mike said, turning around. “We’ll go the long way around-”

He jumped back as a figure rushed past them, stopping right behind them. “Hopper!” Cyclone yelled, relieved.

“Oh, fuck.” Hopper said, glancing between the two new children and the rubble.

“Can you break down a wall to get us out?” Zoomer asked.

“Break down a wall?” Mike said.

“He’s got super strength.” Cyclone shrugged.

“He *what*?”

“Yeah, I’ll break down a wall.” Hopper rolled his eyes. “Send the stable parts of the building crumbling with the rest of it. While we’re at it, wait for me next time! I’ve been trying to find you for ten minutes.”

“Sorry, we got bored.” Zoomer said. “But, hey, as an upside, we found interesting things. Like... I’m pretty sure my leg’s broken.”

“Wonderful.” Hopper said. “Guess we’re going back this way.” He glanced towards Dragonfire and said, “I can carry him, if you-”

El hesitated, glancing towards the others to see if they had any objections, before nodding. Once Hopper picked up the boy, El let him drop and moved to grab Mike’s hand, looking up at him. He gave her a quick smile, saying, “Don’t worry. We’re getting out.”

Hopper turned to move, and they all followed him, slightly relieved

that they didn't have to find the way out on their own. They moved as fast as they could, rushing down halls as more explosions sounded. "What's happening?" Cyclone asked, looking towards the direction of the latest crash.

"Not important." Hopper said, which communicated to Mike that if he knew, he wasn't planning on telling. "What's important is that we get you *out* before this place completely collapses."

"What about everyone else?" Mike asked. "The other people in here?"

"They'll have to get out on their own."

Mike stopped for a second, causing the rest of the group to halt and turn to give him odd looks. "They'll *die*." he said.

"*We'll* die if we don't get out." Hopper replied.

"We... we can't just let them all die..." Mike argued, something starting to flare up in his chest. Something bad.

"They deserve it." Zoomer said, gesturing to El. "They hurt her. And Will, and God knows who else."

"That doesn't mean we should just leave them-"

Leave them to die.

Leave them to get crushed.

Leave them to *burn*...

"Kid, we can talk about this once we get outside." Hopper said.
"Come on, let's-"

At that moment, Mike felt that dread in his chest again. And he let out a yell, releasing El's hand and stumbling backwards, grabbing at his chest. No, no, not now, *not now*...

"Mike?" El yelled without thinking, rushing towards him.

"Fuck!" Cyclone yelled as Mike pushed himself against a wall,

breathing quickly and shutting his eyes tight, trying to ignore everything, trying to keep himself calm.

It wasn't working.

He grabbed his stomach, hearing shouts beside him as the others yelled at each other, but his head was spinning. The room was spinning. He wanted to throw up and cry and his heart wanted to explode.

"Mike, can you move?" he thought he heard, somewhere far away.
"Can you move?"

He shook his head. At least, he thought he did. He was barely able to keep track of the ceiling around him, barely able to hear everyone yelling, and he...

And he...

And he heard a low rumble, and felt a flash of heat, and the ceiling burst above him.

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: We finally get out of the fucking lab.

37. We finally get out of the fucking Lab

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry this is late, Mom dragged me around town all day :(

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

We finally get out of the fucking Lab

“Fuck!” Cyclone yelled as Mike ran to the wall, shutting his eyes.

“Stay back!” El yelled, jumping in front of Mike as Hopper moved towards him. “He needs space!”

“He’s having a panic attack.” Cyclone explained quickly.

“Aw, shit...” Hopper said, moving forwards again, and El threw her hand out, pushing him back slightly.

“Leave him *alone!*” she said.

“El, it’s fine,” Cyclone said, “He’s trying to help.”

“He needs calm.” El said.

“Then we need to get him out of here.” Hopper said. “If you can float-”

El shook her head. “He can’t move.”

“We’re gonna have to move him. The building’s coming down.”

El glanced back to Mike; he’d sunk to the ground, curling up and hugging his knees. “Mike, can you move?” she asked. When he didn’t respond, she asked again, “Can you move?”

He slowly shook his head.

“Fuck...” Zoomer muttered.

“We’re going to have to move him anyway.” Hopper said.

“No.” El said, her voice going low as she glared at him.

“Look, kid, it’s unfortunate, but this place is going down. We’re going to have to.”

Before they could say anything else, they heard a low rumble. They all froze for an instant and then, without thinking, El threw her hands out, using her powers to push the people in front of her to the far end of the hall. And after a second, the ceiling caved.

She could hear the others scream for her and Mike, but the rubble and dust was blocking them from view. El could only throw her hands up, letting the rubble fly away from her and Mike, leaving them both in an empty circle surrounded by pieces of ceiling. She glanced up to see a giant hole, with empty, cluttered hallways from the last floor now visibly above her.

It was around then that Mike started screaming; the fact that part of the building had almost killed them didn’t exactly help his panic attack, El assumed. She rushed over, dropping in front of him. “Mike?”

“El! Mike! Are you okay?” Zoomer yelled.

“What’s going on?” Cyclone asked.

El turned to the rubble. That would take a while to get through, and Zoomer and Dragonfire were injured. They needed to get out, and fast. She took a deep breath, and then yelled, “Get out! I’ll follow!”

“Are you okay?” Cyclone called.

“Yes! Go!”

“We’re not leaving you!” she thought Hopper might have yelled that, but another crash sounded from the other side of the building, disrupting her hearing.

“He can’t move! GO!”

There was a pause, and then Hopper yelled, “We’re coming back for you! Stay safe!”

“Go!”

She hoped they were leaving; it was hard to tell from past the rubble. However, she didn’t have the time; El turned back to Mike, trying to remember what Lucas had told her to do. “Mike. Are you okay? Look at me. Are you okay?”

Mike was breathing hard, starting to cry.

“Mike, you’re safe.” Well, that was a lie. “You’re here. You’re with me. Look at me.”

Finally, Mike glanced up, looking up at her.

“Can I touch you?”

He stared at her for a long while before nodding, and El grabbed his hands. “Are you okay?”

“I... I thought...” Mike stuttered, glancing around. “I thought this would help...”

He thought the transformation would stop the panic attacks.

“Mike...” El wasn’t sure what to say. She wasn’t good with words at all. “Mike, it’s okay.”

“It’s *not* okay!” Mike said, his volume raising. “El, I’m *not fucking* okay!”

El stared at him for a second, trying to figure out how to make him feel better. Finally, she gripped his hands tighter and said, “Okay.”

He gave her a confused look, and she added, “If... if you aren’t okay... that’s okay?”

That probably didn’t make any sense, but at least her message came

across. Mike leaned over, giving her a tight hug. El gripped him back, and the two of them hugged for several minutes, until they heard another crash and jumped.

“We have to go, don’t we?” Mike asked, still not pulling away.

El nodded quietly.

“I can put a field around us, so we can move through everything.”

“No. You’ll panic.”

“I want to try.”

“Mike.” El said firmly. “You don’t have to. You don’t have to protect me.”

“El, I know that.” he said, his voice still shaking a little, but something told El that he was sure. “These are *my* powers. However I... however I got them, they’re *mine*. And I want to use them.”

El hesitated, and then said, “Not right now. But if we need to.”

Mike nodded numbly, accepting this.

They slowly stood, staring ahead at the rubble. El grabbed onto Mike’s hand and stared ahead, and after a second, the pieces of the ceiling rose, creating a pathway for them.

“Let’s get out of this fucking hellhole.” Mike said, reaching up to wipe his face with his free sleeve.

Mike knew something would go wrong.

But he didn’t know *how* wrong.

They rushed down the halls, gripping onto each others’ hands for dear life, hearing other men yell and shoot and run. They didn’t run into anyone, and once in a while Mike glanced towards the noise, sympathy etched across his face, but there was nothing he could do

for now. Maybe once he got El out, he could go back for more people.

If there were any left.

They made it to the Lobby, only to freeze upon seeing rubble surrounding the path towards the door.

“Do you think you can move it?” Mike asked.

“I...” El began, but she was interrupted by a shout from behind them.

“Eleven?”

They both jumped, whipping around to stare at the person at the other end of the hall. Mike raised his hands, prepared to summon a shield, but El put her hand on his shoulder, steadying him for a second before saying, “Eight!”

El finally released Mike’s hand, rushing off towards her sister. Mike’s hand felt cold suddenly, but that didn’t matter. He’d wait for her and her sister, and then they’d leave together.

The two girls hugged for an instant, and then Eight pulled away, scanning her with her eyes. “What happened? Are you hurt?”

El shook her head.

Eight glanced towards Mike. “Who is this?”

“Mike.” El said. “Friend.”

Eight gave him a quick look, and stepped forwards slightly. However, she paused for an instant, turning around. “More men are coming.” she said. “Hold on a second.”

She started to move down the hall, and El said, “Eight, wait-”

That was when the rumbling started again.

Mike heard it first- El was focused on Eight, and Eight was heading towards whoever was coming to them. And he heard the noise, and for a good minute, he was frozen.

He froze, and that made him blame himself for what happened next.

The second he could move, he started running forwards, running for El, already holding out his hands to prepare a shield. “*El!*” he screamed.

El whipped around to stare at him, and as he stared at her, he saw the realization of what was about to happen dawn in her eyes.

“Mike!”

And that was when the ceiling exploded.

Mike could only catch a glimpse of pieces of the ceiling heading straight for El, before he was hit by a blast of heat.

Whatever had blown up the ceiling, it had exploded again, this time much closer to them. Something exploded right beside him, and he was thrown off of his feet by the blast, the blast that set fire to the world around him.

Fire.

He was on fire.

And he only had a moment to process this before his head hit the wall, and the world went black.

He could only piece together shattered remains of what happened next.

Anything memories he could retain, he saw as though he were watching them through a reflection in a dark pond at midnight. It was unfocused, it was blurry, it was dark, he wasn’t sure if he actually knew what he was seeing, and almost always there was nothing but blackness.

He remembered heat- of course. Of course he remembered the fucking heat. He thought he remembered someone dropping down in front of him, their voice loud with alarm. He thought he remembered

someone lifting him, thought he could recall arms wrapped around him and rushing him out of the flames, the rubble pushed out of their way. They might have run him straight through the fire, but he was unharmed, so that was probably just a hallucination.

He didn't remember anything else until he was put down, feeling dirt under his legs but processing nothing. Someone ran, leaving him there. Or maybe they stayed. He heard footsteps, maybe? But mostly he heard nothing.

And then he heard a voice he recognized, a voice he later pieced together as his sister's. "I found Mike! *I found him!* He's hurt! Guys, he's hurt!"

Mike blacked out completely after that. He didn't remember what the boys later told him, when they said that they found him staring blankly into air, covered in scrapes and burns, and that he'd burst into quiet sobs when they carried him away, rushing him to Castle Byers, where Joyce kicked open a secret panel in the wall, pulling out a First Aid kit that the boys hadn't known existed to treat him until he eventually awoke.

All he remembered was his last thought before the darkness completely overwhelmed him.

El's not here...

38. Mike and El get Separation Anxiety and I scream because I have to write time skips

Notes for the Chapter:

ooooooh boy here comes the part where unfortunately you can kinda tell these sections were originally flashbacks in Part II... apologies for that, but I am NOT writing a four-part fic.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Mike and El get Separation Anxiety and I scream because I have to write time skips

Mike came to a full day after the explosion.

He opened his eyes, seeing the bookshelf across the room, where Max and Lucas were sleeping on top of a pile of sleeping bags; Lucas's arm was around Max, and she didn't seem to mind. He could hear muttering from around the room, and something from behind the glass.

The glass.

He shut his eyes, tears threatening to fall. What was going on? He'd been with El, and they'd been in the hall...

He opened his eyes again, and someone walked into view. He froze, staring, as Will turned around. They looked at each other for an instant, and then Will rushed over, hugging Mike as tightly as he dared.

"Mike!" he yelled, his voice shaking. "Mike, thank God!"

"W-Will?" Mike said, his voice sounding hoarse and broken.

He heard more people come, and suddenly Nancy was there, throwing her arms around him and yelling something about how

sorry she was and was he okay and did he need anything? Mike could catch a glimpse of what looked like Steve running towards Lucas and Max, shaking them awake, as more people filtered into view... was that Hopper? And Joyce? Jonathan seemed to be there, with Dustin joining Steve and kicking at the other kids to get them to stand up.

Someone wasn't there, but his head was still swimming, he couldn't quite figure it out...

"Will, you're okay..." Mike managed to say as Nancy finally let him go.

Will nodded, smiling, wringing his hands together; they looked kind of red, he wondered what that was all about. "Y-yeah. I'm fine. Kali and Mom and Hopper got me out." *Kali?* "But they said you guys helped. I got to see Max in costume- she's okay, too, but she can't walk that *far*. I haven't seen your costume yet, though, it got blown off in the blast."

There was a blast, wasn't there?

"That happens sometimes. Usually costume change is involuntary, but sometimes large bursts of emotion- usually panic- can switch you back to civilian form, but the transformation will absorb the impact of most injuries... Mike?"

There was a blast. He was shaking again, remembering the all-too familiar heat against his skin, the feeling of flying into the air... he hadn't been hit with hot glass, true, but it was too similar a feeling to make him very comfortable. He felt Nancy throw an arm around him again, and she moved to sit next to him... what was he on? A rolling table? Hold on, what was wrapped around his arm? Some kind of bandage?

"I'm sorry." Nancy said, her voice breaking a little. "I was setting off the explosives, we were trying to get that place shut down, and you got caught up in it, I'm *sorry*..."

"Yeah, you wanna tell me where you got explosives?" Hopper asked.

"Not the time." Jonathan muttered.

Something was still missing, something in his head that was slowly waking up...

“Are... are you okay?” he heard Max ask, and Mike glanced towards her; she and Lucas had moved over to him; Lucas had his arm around her, helping her walk forwards. Everyone was around the room, probably trying not to crowd him, but he could tell they were all watching him. Why were they all watching him?

Then it hit him.

“Where’s El?”

Everyone froze.

Mike sat up a bit more, looking around the room. Where was she? Where was-

He remembered the rubble heading towards her, remembered her staring at him right before the blast went off.

No.

“Where’s El? *Where’s El?*”

He tried to stand up, only for Nancy to grab his shoulders, holding him in place. Everyone’s expressions weren’t exactly comforting; Dustin looked about ready to cry, while Lucas and Max grabbed each others’ hands, looking away from him. Will just looked awkward, moving towards his Mom and Brother, who both just looked *sad*.

“*Where’s El?*”

“We... we couldn’t find her in the building, and we had to move before we could-” Hopper began.

No, no, no-

“No! No! No!” Mike was screaming now, and trying to throw Nancy off of him. “You’re lying! Where is she? What happened?”

“Mike, if she... if she got out, she’d come to us-” Lucas began.

“Don’t fucking say that!” Mike screamed, whipping around, turning on him, glaring him down. “Don’t say that! She’s okay, she’s not...”

“Mike, please, please calm down.” Nancy said, still trying to get him to sit still.

“I was supposed to protect her!” Mike said, looking up at Nancy, terrified. “I was supposed to protect her and I failed! I fucked it up! I lost her because I can’t do anything and I couldn’t-”

“Mike, no, it’s okay, it wasn’t your fault-”

“Mike, sweetie, please calm down.” Joyce said, her voice shaking a little, as she started to move forwards.

Everyone was coming forwards. They wanted him to calm down. He wasn’t going to calm down.

“Leave me alone!” Mike yelled, trying to throw Nancy off. “Get the fuck away from me!”

“Mike-”

“Leave me *ALONE!*”

Mike, barely thinking, curled into himself, wrapping himself in a tight hug, and then he threw his limbs out, screaming. A sphere of light burst out of himself, knocking everybody back, throwing them against the floor and the wall. He was surrounded by his own forcefield, blocking anybody from reaching him.

He didn’t even try to take it down, try to calm the panic rising in his chest.

El was gone.

He couldn’t protect her.

She’d just gotten free, she’d just transformed, she’d just learned how to *live*.

And he’d failed her.

El was *gone*.

And Mike sobbed.

Far, far away, El woke up.

She looked up, seeing only a dark ceiling. She tried to sit up, only to jump upon realizing that she was moving. She let out a piercing shriek, and the van she was in skidded to a stop.

“Eleven, it’s okay! It’s okay, it’s me. Shit, I thought you’d be asleep.”

El stayed still, feeling sudden pain all over her body, as someone rushed to the back of the van, climbing in beside her.

“Ei-eight?”

“It’s okay, Eleven. We’re going somewhere safe. I promise.”

El glanced up at her. “What?”

“The building blew up. I found you in the rubble, and I ran. More soldiers were coming. I couldn’t find the others, so I went to my hideout. My friends weren’t there, we’re going to an alternative meeting place.”

El wasn’t entirely sure what was going on, but she picked up on one important thing. “My friends?”

Eight flinched. “I’m not sure. I think one of them was injured-”

El didn’t realize she was crying for a second, shock still rushing through her veins. Her friends couldn’t have abandoned her. They *couldn’t* have, especially since Mike wanted so much to protect her...

Mike...

The Blast.

“Eleven, it’s okay. We’re going to be okay.”

El threw her arms around her sister, burying her head in her chest and sobbing. Eight jumped, but hugged her back, still whispering comforting words.

It was several minutes later, when El said, “When can we go back?”

Eight paused, before saying, “Not for a long while. Even after we find my friends, they’ll be looking for us there. I’m sorry, Eleven, I—”

“El.”

It was the only thing she could think to say. She glanced up at her sister, saying, “I’m El.”

Eight stared down at her, and then said, “I’m Kali.”

Kali.

El cried into her sister’s chest for what felt like forever, just wishing she could go back, go *home*.

She wanted to go *home*.

Mike stayed in Castle Byers for another week.

Hopper left a lot; he risked going to work, and they were all relieved to find that the government hadn’t kidnapped him while he was out. After that, Joyce started leaving during the day, too, not able to afford staying away from work for long. The teens and kids stayed in the Castle, staring at the wall, playing games on their phones, throwing books to each other, testing powers in the glass room.

Mike, meanwhile, just curled up and stared at nothing.

He was in the corner for hours, his mind numb. Everyone glanced at him occasionally, sometimes tried to engage him in conversation, but he had nothing to say.

Finally, two days in, Nancy walked up to him and lifted him to his feet.

"Get up." she said. "Get the fuck up." He stared at her in shock as she said, "We get it. You're sad. And that's fine. But she wouldn't want you to give up on her, or on yourself. Don't give up."

He continued to stare at her, before finally saying, in a broken voice, "Alright."

It wasn't enthusiastic, but it was a start.

"Now come on. Will's going to show us what his pink powers can do."

The rest of the week went by in a blur; Mike smiled once or twice, maybe even laughed. But he wasn't happy. There was a numbness inside, an emptiness slowly growing. And every time something happy happened, he eventually was brought down, wishing that *she* could be there to experience it, too.

Wishing that it wasn't his fault she was gone.

On Day Eight, Hopper came in and told them all that it had been cleared up.

"Government covered shit up, of course, but they'll leave you alone. They still don't know you've got powers- even you, Will, since all their records of you were destroyed."

The only one who seemed even less excited than Mike was Nancy. "Are you saying they got away with it?"

"I'm *saying* that you should be happy none of you are getting arrested." Hopper said. He turned to the boys and said, "And you three- don't think we're not going to have a *talk* about the vigilante shit."

"You're not gonna stop us." Lucas said sternly.

Mike bit his lip. He had tried not to think about his friends going out and fighting crime again, but obviously it was going to happen. They would be going out, without protection, and with even less people liking them than before.

“And you-” Hopper pointed to Max. “About you living on your own-”

Instantly, Lucas and Dustin stepped in front of her. “She’s staying with us.” Lucas said.

“She’s not going anywhere.” Dustin said at the same time.

“I’m going back to California when I’m dead!” Max added, glaring up at Hopper. “So they can throw my corpse into the sea for the sharks!”

Hopper gave Max an odd look, but continued, “What I was *saying* was, you’re moving your stuff to the Henderson’s.”

There was a long pause, before Dustin said, “What?”

“Legally, I did have to talk to your Mom.” Hopper said to Max. “But I told her that we have a Youth Outreach program that you ‘joined’ before you ‘told us your full legal name’. She’s given you permission to stay so long as you call her on occasion- and she’s coming into town this weekend to check up on you, try not to piss her off too much. And I had to talk to your Mom, Dustin, to tell her where the fuck you’ve been, and she said you have a Guest Room for Max to stay in.”

Max and Dustin glanced at each other, and then Max broke into a bright smile, throwing her arm around the boy. “New brother!” she cheered.

“Okay, that’s not-” Dustin began.

“I’m gonna call you ‘Good Billy.’”

“I would prefer it if you didn’t.”

They laughed a little, and then Hopper told them it was time to go. They followed, with Max joking with Lucas and Dustin, and Will rushing forwards to catch up. Mike trailed behind, biting his lip and glancing at the ground.

They left the Castle and went into town and into the police station, with Hopper briefing them on their story- got lost in the woods, found Will in some underground tunnels that they all fell into,

absolutely no government coverups here, no sir. Meanwhile, Mike and Nancy were to say they didn't know anything the government men might have said about them. Mike took this all in with a sinking feeling in his chest, knowing that he'd have to pretend everything was normal, pretend that Will hadn't been kidnapped and tortured and that El hadn't... and that he hadn't...

"This sucks." Nancy whispered to him just before their Mom came in, crying, to hug them and tell them how worried she'd been.

Mike couldn't agree more.

But he was only back to routine for a week- of his parents trying to move past the situation, of Nancy shutting herself in her room, of trying to stare at the ceiling and forget- when he went out again.

Nancy had walked out of her room on that morning, her hair chopped off to the shortest possible length. "Got sick of it." she said quietly to him, before wandering into the kitchen to shock Karen and probably get a lecture from her on her impulsivity.

Mike, meanwhile, found it in him to wander out of the apartment, riding his bike to Will's place. He was supposed to be in bed, recovering from the shock of it all before he would eventually get sent back to school, but he wanted to see his friends.

Jonathan was the only Byers home, and when Mike asked where Will was, he bit his lip and said, "He's not doing too good. But the other kids went to..."

He didn't have to say where. Mike knew.

So he biked into the woods again, and fell into Castle Byers.

As soon as he landed, he looked up to see the other kids staring at him.

"Hey." he said, glaring at them. Lucas, Dustin and Max had transformed, and Max was flipping what looked like a shimmering sword that must have come from the weapons wall in her hands.

"So, you're going off crime-fighting without Will?" Mike said. *Without*

El and Me, too was the unspoken add-on.

“Uh, there’s some kind of gang or something starting to build in the city-side of town.” Lucas said. “Dustin hooked the supercomputer to his phone, it notifies him when there’s a crime going on.”

“We’re just going to check it out, but it might get ugly. Will’s still recovering from the shit that happened to him, but he told us he’d join us when he could.” Max said.

Mike stood up, looking between them. “And Hopper?”

“Joyce convinced him that we weren’t going to stop us unless he arrested us, and he kinda didn’t want to do that.” Dustin shrugged, eyeing Mike warily. “So he said so long as we kept it lowkey and let him and Joyce stop by to train us and shit, we could play heroes for a bit.”

Mike stared between them, and he could tell that they thought he was going to yell at them or freak out or something. Instead, he held out his hands, and summoned a Field between them.

Immediately, they all stared screaming, rushing forwards. “What are you *doing?*” Lucas yelled.

“I’m coming with you.” Mike said, struggling to keep his voice level. His heart was starting to beat a bit faster, but he couldn’t look scared now.

“Mike, your powers-”

“Your panic attack-”

“You can’t just-”

Mike was really tired of being told that he *couldn’t*.

“Shut *up!*” he yelled, his frustration boiling over. “Shut the *fuck* up and let me do something to help!”

They did shut up, but they looked a *hell* of a lot more worried. He sighed as he felt the energy course up his arms, and he said, “Listen. I

feel like shit. And I'm not gonna lie, I'm kind of triggering myself right now, so my best guess is, soon as I stop talking, I'm gonna flip shit.”

“*What?*” Lucas said.

“But—” Mike gave him a pointed glare, “I’m going to help. Because it’s better than sitting in my room and doing *nothing*. So, if you guys are going to run off and play superheroes, you at least need some kind of defense. Because none of you have any self-preservation instincts.”

The kids all looked at each other as Mike tried to remember those breathing exercises he was supposed to do when he felt panicked. He *really* wanted to grab his jacket, but that would break the energy, and he wasn’t going to drop the transformation so easily.

Finally, Lucas said, “Okay.”

And Mike threw his hands together, feeling his powers shoot over him. The others gasped at the transformation, jumping back, and it only took a second for Mike to realize why; some kind of energy had bounced away from him, sending a gust of wind and knocking a few of the weapons and books off the wall.

“Damn it, Mike,” Dustin groaned, “That’s why you transform in the practice room!”

Mike took a deep breath, running his hands over his outfit and nodding. Lucas reached forwards, slowly grabbing his arm, and he said, “Are you okay? Do you need anything?”

Mike grabbed onto Lucas’s hand, slowly calming himself down, and he said, “No.”

“Well, then.” Max said, glancing at Mike. “You ready to go?”

Mike nodded, allowing a small smile to flit across his face. “Guess I’m your Paladin.”

They didn’t find Kali’s friends at the other meeting spot. Or the next.

Or the next.

“Can you try and find them?” Kali asked after three weeks of travel; the two of them were sitting in the back of the van, eating food they stole from the back of a fast food place. El was running her hands through her hair, which had grown very little since her escape, but was long enough to notice.

“I’d need...” she tried to remember what Mike had called it. “Sensory Deprivation. And an image.”

“And image?”

“A picture.”

Kali swore. “Fuck. I haven’t got those. We’ve avoided documentation of our existence like the plague. We’ll just have to keep looking.”

El stared sadly down at her food. Of course they’d keep looking.

Of course.

They kept looking for weeks to months, and El continued to practice her powers. Kali thought that was best; their powers were gifts, she said, and they had to use them as best they could. She figured out how to enter the void with just some static and a blindfold, but it was a much weaker connection than if she’d had the Bath.

She saw Mike in the Void.

He couldn’t see her, or hear her, but she could see him. Sometimes he was doing homework, or helping his sister, and sometimes she even saw him transformed. It was nice that he was getting a hold of his powers. That was good, at least. And she was so glad that he was alright. She’d been worried for weeks that he hadn’t gotten out of the Lab, that he’d been caught in the blast, that he’d been seriously hurt trying to reach her.

One night, she saw him sitting on his bed, staring at the wall. She watched, wondering what he was doing, and then he said,

“It’s been Sixty-Three days.”

When she left the Void, El found a calendar and went back Sixty-Three days, staring once she found what Mike meant.

She'd been gone for Sixty-Three days.

And it was on day Seventy-Two that Kali got hurt. She spotted someone that she recognized, who used to work for the Lab, and she chased him down. El only barely managed to follow, barely stopping to see Kali pull a gun on him, asking where her friends were, if he even *regretted* what he'd done to them, if he knew what happened at the Lab. El called for Kali to stop, and when Kali turned to stare at her, the man pulled a gun and shot her leg.

El had screamed and threw the man against the wall with her powers until he was knocked out, and then she ran for Kali, barely managing to lift her up with her mind and running her back to the van.

"Where do we go?" she asked. She tried to remember where Mike had said he'd been when he was hurt. "Hospital?"

"No! No, they'll find out who I am, and they'll take me back..." Kali said, panic overtaking her. "We need a safe place, we need someone who can help..."

El stared at her for a second, and then she said. "I know someone." She paused, and then added, "But I'm going to have to drive."

39. El is definitely grounded

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

El is definitely grounded

It was Day Two-Hundred and Three.

Nancy and Karen were on a College Visit (“It’s never too early to start looking,” their Mom had said), Dad was at a Business trip, and Mom had left him in charge of Holly.

However, when Mike got a text from Dustin, simply saying, - *We've got a gold star in the woods*, he turned to his sister and said, “Hey, Holly, how would you like to visit your favorite friend Erica?”

Holly cheered, and Mike asked Ms. Sinclair if she'd be so kind to watch Holly while he biked to school to pick up some work he forgot, and then he rushed to Castle Byers.

As he dropped into the hideout, he asked, “What’ve we got?”

He heard a blast from the Practice Room, and he caught a glimpse of Max rushing out, now dressed in Zoomer-wear, as Dustin said, “Nothing major, just a bank robbery.”

God, Mike wished he lived in a world where that was a strange sentence.

“We don’t all have to go.” Lucas said. “Max’s gonna run me and Will over, and then she and Dustin are gonna wait outside in case it gets heated.”

“I’ll go with you.” Mike said.

There wasn’t an argument this time. It had been over a hundred days since Mike had officially joined them. And it wasn’t perfect- he still had to be in the most stress-free environment to transform, or else he’d have to take time to calm down. He still couldn’t hear the sound

of glass shattering or feel the heat of a fire without dissolving into a panic attack. But he had managed to do something.

He'd managed to summon his Field, quite a lot.

He heard another blast of energy, and he turned to see Will in the practice room, having taken Max's place. He was in his silver-and-rainbow suit, and he smiled down at it. He'd only just re-joined the Party, finally convincing his Mom that he wanted to help.

"So," he said loudly, "Are you going out dressed like *that*?"

Mike smiled as Will held open the door for him, moving into the practice room. The glass was still a bit of a bother, but if he stood back far enough, it was alright, and the room was cold enough that he was starting to feel calm while there.

So he summoned some energy, and started to transform into their Paladin.

The Heist went well... at first.

Cyclone and Zoomer stayed outside the building, and Wisdom touched a black bag left out front, absorbing the color and then disappearing into a shadow. After a minute, he came back and said, "They're on the second floor. Burning open a safe."

Dragonfire glanced towards Paladin. "You gonna be—"

"Is it a blowtorch?" Paladin asked carefully.

Wisdom nodded. "Real small."

"Then I should be fine."

"We'll still take that out first." Dragonfire said, and then he turned to Wisdom. "Alright, Shadow Boy, beam us up."

Wisdom grabbed onto his friends' arms, nodded at Zoomer and Cyclone, and then vanished. Paladin took a deep breath before they

left, and he was really glad he remembered to do that, as once they disappeared into the darkness, a deep cold gripped his chest, and he felt suffocated. It was only for a few seconds, but by the time Wisdom pulled them out of the shadows and into the room, Paladin had to duck under a table, taking a few seconds to breathe as Dragonfire shot out an energy beam, and Paladin could hear men yell at the sudden appearance of powered kids and the sudden hit of Dragonfire's blast. He stayed under the table for a second, until Wisdom ducked beside him, grabbing onto the metal table, his skin turning the same shade of gray. "You okay?" he asked.

Paladin nodded. "Let's kick some ass."

He and his friend rushed out, as Wisdom threw out his arms to move a safe to knock one of the men in the head. Paladin ducked down and then threw out his arms, letting his strands of light shoot out, knocking someone over. He smirked as Dragonfire shot more energy over his head. He rushed over towards Wisdom, who was trying to place the safe back on the shelf. "Think you can ice-wall them?"

"I have to save that for when the police arrive." Wisdom explained, shaking his head. "Once my powers fade, the ice'll melt, so we're gonna want to wait or find something more solid to hold them."

Paladin nodded; he still wasn't entirely used to his friend's powers, and was still working on memorizing the list of colors-to-powers that Dustin had given to him. Some of them were easy enough- red was fire, blue was water, for example. However, it was sometimes hard to remember that pink gave him control over steam and smoke, and cyan over technology- what was the difference between cyan and light blue, anyway? The one thing he *could* remember was that mixing the colors resulted in bad things- Dustin's overly dramatic retelling of what had happened when they'd tried was enough to permanently scare him away from suggesting such a thing.

Paladin was suddenly brought out of his thoughts by Wisdom yelling, "*Fuck!*" He managed to duck as Dragonfire soared over his head; one of the men apparently snuck up on him and then kicked him.

As Wisdom rushed towards their friend, Paladin turned, giving the men a dark glare, and he shot out his hands. His strands flew

forwards, slapping the men with bursts of light and heat. He jumped forwards, surrounding himself with a field to knock the men away from him. He dropped the shield almost immediately, before throwing his hands out, letting more strands shoot out of his fingers and spinning, using the light as a whip to knock the men farther away. He dropped to the ground again, letting bright flashes surround him. He jumped up, about to shoot out more lift, until he heard,

“Stop!”

Paladin froze, slowly turning. Wisdom was staring at him, eyes wide and terrified. Paladin glanced quickly away, looking towards the men on the ground, now with burns up their arms.

Fuck.

Paladin backed up closer to the others, saying, “Sorry, I’m sorry, I-”

“You weren’t thinking.” Dragonfire finished, shooting him a look.

Wisdom looked to Dragonfire, horrified. “Has this *happened* before? You’re going around *burning* people?”

“Cyclone electrocutes them!”

“That’s different, it’s such a low level it couldn’t hurt them too much-”

“Oh, like we didn’t fucking kill people when Nancy bombed the-”

“That *wasn’t* our fucking fault!”

“Shit!”

Upon Dragonfire’s exclamation, Paladin whipped around to see one of the men raising a gun to them. He threw up his hands, shutting his eyes as he felt his fingers heat up and field close around them. He could hear gunshots ring out, and took several deep breaths, trying to keep himself calm as he waited for the impact of the bullets.

An impact that didn’t come.

He slowly opened his eyes, peering through the light of the field as he could hear Wisdom was muttering something worriedly to Dragonfire, something about “how many times?” and “reckless” and “it wasn’t our fault.” Paladin was clearly not paying attention to their conversation, instead looking through the field. The men were yelling something, and their guns were on the floor- why would they drop their guns? One of them reached to grab it, and it flew away, hitting the wall.

His first thought was, *Damnit, Ms. Byers followed us on a mission and is stealing their guns.*

His second thought was, *Ms. Byers can’t stop bullets.*

Maybe Hopper’s with her?

Why would they both follow us?

And then it hit him, and he instantly dropped the field.

“Are you okay?” Dragonfire asked quickly, probably thinking he was having a panic attack.

“What’s going on?” Wisdom asked, sounding confused and concerned.

Paladin drowned them out, instead staring at the doorway of the room, where a girl stood. She threw out her hands, and the men hit the wall.

She turned, and saw that one of the boys had spotted her. They stared for a second, and then she ran, suddenly a flash of black-and-pink.

Paladin stared for an instant, shock completely paralyzing him. And then he took off, running out the door and into the hall, ignoring his friends’ shouts.

She was there.

She was there.

He caught her ducking down the corner, and he followed, turning the bend and yelling, “El!”

She stopped, almost across the hall already. And slowly, she turned, staring at him.

Her hair was longer. It was curly.

She's right here.

“El.” he said again.

“I can’t...” that was her voice, her voice only a few feet from him. “I have to go, not safe...”

“Not safe?” Paladin said.

“If I’m seen with you, they’ll know you’re with me...” her vocabulary had expanded.

“I don’t care.” he said, stepping forwards a little. “I don’t care, El, please tell me you’re not leaving...”

She stared at him for a second, running her hand over her curls almost subconsciously. Paladin glanced down at his outfit and, without thinking, clapped his hands together, letting the suit disappear. He figured the security cameras were cut, but even if they weren’t, he didn’t care who saw him there. He just wanted to see her, he wanted her to see him.

And El stared at him- stared at *Mike* , and then she rushed at him, and he ran towards her and suddenly they were hugging, and he had his arms around her and he could run his fingers through her hair and hold her and hug her and *she was there*.

“El...” he said again, his voice breaking a little. He slowly pulled away, studying her face. She was *alive* and *right in front of him* and *he could see her* . “El, I didn’t give up on you, I knew you were okay, I-“

“I wanted to come back,” El said, overlapping him, “It wasn’t safe.”

“It’s been-“

“Two-Hundred and Three days.”

“You kept track?”

“So did you.”

They stared for a second, and then they heard footsteps rushing forwards.

“*Shit, it’s the cops!*” Mike swore, grabbing El’s hand and trying to pull her away. “Come on, let’s-“

El paused, however, staring in the direction of the noise. They heard a voice, and then Mike swore. “Damn, it’s the Chief. I mean, good, he’s nice to us, but if he’s got anyone with him- we should go.”

El, however, had frozen over. “*Shit.*” she finally managed to say.

“What?”

“I’m in so much shit.”

“What?”

At that point, Hopper turned the corner, in full police uniform and yelling something into a communicator. He froze, staring at the kids. El hesitated, and then waved.

“Sorry, Hop.” Mike said quietly. “But, uh, El’s back!”

Hopper slowly turned the walkie-talkie on, and said, “Hold on a minute.” And then he said, “What the *fuck* are you doing?”

“Well, we-” Mike began.

“Not you.” Hopper said, turning to El. “Why are you *here?*”

“Mike was in trouble.”

“And how’d you find *that* out?”

“Police Radio.”

“Damnit, I told you to turn that off!”

With a sinking feeling in his gut, Mike said, “What’s going on? Hop, have... have you been *hiding her?*”

There was another pause, and then Hopper said, “Who else is here?”

“E-everyone.”

“El, take them home. We’re going to have a talk.”

El groaned, then grabbed Mike’s hand. “Fine.”

“No, no, were you *hiding her?* What the *fuck?*” Mike’s voice rose, anger suddenly boiling over.

“We can talk about this,” Hopper said, infuriatingly calmly, “When you’re not in the middle of a *crime scene.* Go!”

And so El rushed down a hall, dragging Mike after her. And once they got to the room, El paused, turning to Mike. “Transformation.” she said.

Mike paused, holding out his hands, which felt a bit sore. He’d *just* transformed, and was beginning to feel a little tired, but after a minute, he was back in the suit, he was the Paladin again, and El rushed into the room, dragging him along with her.

Upon their entrance, they caught sight of Wisdom icing the men to the wall. “I thought I heard cops.” he said, glancing to Paladin. “So I figured- who is *that?*”

He stared at El blankly, staring in confusion at her, though his eyes lit up a little at her costume. Dragonfire, meanwhile, gaped in shock, before saying, hopefully, “El?”

El nodded, and started to move forwards to hug him. However, once they heard more footsteps, she said, “We have to go. Where’s...?” she glanced at the men. “Our runner?”

“Downstairs.” Dragonfire said. “Wisdom, can you-”

As the white faded from his skin, Wisdom nodded, now looking at El with something akin to awe upon learning who she was. He grabbed onto a stapler, draining the color. “This should be enough to take us down the building through the shadows.” he said. “But not much else.”

“We’ll have our Zoomer.” Dragonfire said. “El, grab onto him.”

El nodded, moving forwards. Paladin trailed her, not wanting to release her hand for fear she’d slip away again.

As they all grabbed onto Wisdom, he said, “I’ve, uh, heard a lot about you.”

El didn’t respond as they disappeared, and she didn’t say anything when they reappeared in front of Cyclone and Zoomer, who were still hiding in the alley behind the building.

“El?” both of them said.

After recovering from the shock of the travel, El said, “I’ll explain soon. But we have to go to Hopper’s.”

“What?” Cyclone asked, while Zoomer simply shrugged off her shock, gave El a quick side-hug, and held out her arm for the others to grasp.

“Let’s go.”

40. Mike yells at the Chief of Police

CHAPTER FORTY

Mike yells at the Chief of Police

They were awkwardly silent during the entire run to the apartment, with Paladin refusing to release El's hand and using his other to grab onto Zoomer for dear life, everyone giving El curious and relieved looks, and to be fair, they were all pretty out of breath by the time they reached the elevator up, so it wasn't as if they *could* talk if they wanted.

"We haven't got a key to Hopper's place." Cyclone said after a second. "We won't be able to get in."

"I could pick the lock." Zoomer offered. "I'll have to detransform—"

"I have a key." El said after a minute.

"What? Why?" Dragonfire asked.

"Because she's been living with him." Paladin said, his voice sounding quiet. "Right? He's been hiding you."

El hesitated, and then said, "He was the only one I could go to."

"You couldn't come to us?" Cyclone asked, sounding slightly hurt.

El shook her head. "No, no, it's not... you couldn't fix gunshots."

"Fix what?"

The elevator doors opened, and they all entered the hall, rushing down to Hopper's room. They glanced at each other, and then El clasped her hands together, and her suit melted away. They all stared at her in shock for a second; she was wearing only a simply t-shirt

and shorts, but, well, they hadn't seen her in anything other than Mike's old clothes, and they hadn't even seen *her* in a couple months, so it was quite a shock, especially adding on that she had quite a bit of curly hair now.

Wisdom was the first to move, detransforming himself, too, and then Cyclone and Dragonfire followed. Zoomer hesitated, probably wondering if she'd tire herself out, but she eventually follow suit. Paladin stared at El until she managed to dig a key out of her pocket, and she moved to the door, and then he clasped his hands and felt the energy drain from him, and he was Mike again.

El opened the door, shepherding the kids in. "Hurry." she whispered. "I'm already in trouble, I don't want more with—"

As she shut the door, Dustin asked, "Trouble? With who?"

At that moment, a tall teenager rushed in, yelling, "Jane! What the fuck were you thinking?"

The kids all froze, staring at her, as El said, "My friends were in trouble."

"Yes, that's what *this* said." the older girl waved a paper in front of her. "Oh, wait, sorry, it said, *Saving friends. Cover for me.* This is the fifth fucking time, Jane, I'm not going to let you run off and blow your cover!"

El stuck out her tongue.

"Oh, real mature." the girl rolled her eyes. "Try *this* for once." She then proceeded to flip them all off.

Before either girl could add anything else, Will said, quietly, "*Kali?*"

Kali froze, dropping the paper to the ground, and she turned to stare at him. "Will?" she asked, studying him.

It had been months since she'd seen him, and it had only been once, when he was tired and beaten up. Obviously she hadn't recognized him, but it had taken Will a little bit to recognize her, too; while her hair was still purple, the hair on the shaved side of her head had

started to grow back, and her jacket was gone, replaced by a dark sweater and jeans. She didn't look like the scary rebel he'd spent a week with- or at least, not *quite* as scary.

They stared for a second, and then Will broke out of his friends, rushing forwards and hugging Kali. She flinched, about to jump back, but she relaxed a little once she realized what he was doing. "Hey, hey." she said awkwardly. "Are you doing okay?"

While she was distracted, El felt a tap on her shoulder, and she turned to see Dustin. "Hey!" he said, smiling brightly, and then he hugged her. El hugged him back, shutting her eyes and smiling, as she felt someone else join the hug- probably Mike, and before he knew it, Lucas and Max were there, too, and they were all hugging and smiling together.

"We missed you." Dustin said.

"We talked about you pretty much every day." Lucas added.

"We were worried that you..." Max said.

They slowly pulled away after a second, as they heard Kali say, "And you're not too hurt?"

"No." Will said, glancing up at her. "Are you okay?"

"Well... I've been better. Got shot a few weeks ago." Kali shrugged. "But Jane drove us back here, and the Chief's a policeman, he was able to take care of it without calling the authorities. Jane and I are still on the run-"

"Who the hell is Jane?" Max interrupted.

Kali blinked at them for a second, confused, and then said, "Oh, right! Right, she left before... well, the Chief looked us up in the files Will's Mother stole, and found out where we came from. Our families... aren't around, but we did find out her name."

"Jane?" Mike asked cautiously.

"Jane Ives." Kali nodded.

They all looked to her, and Dustin asked, “So... should *we* call you ‘Jane’?”

El shrugged. “El’s fine.”

Kali narrowed her eyes, but said nothing.

They all heard the doorknob turning, and looked around to see Hopper walk in. He shut the door, crossed his arms, and glared.

Very quickly, Kali said, “I swear to God, I did *not* let her out.”

“*Kal.*” El huffed.

“I’m not getting in trouble because *you* snuck out again.”

“Again?” Hopper glared at them.

“Not my fault!” Kali threw her arms up, stepping back.

“Excuse me?” Mike said, and they all jumped at the gravity in his voice. “Yeah. Wanna explain the fact that you *hid her from us?*”

There was silence for a second, and then Hopper said, “Look, kid-”

“We thought she was *dead* !” Mike’s voice rose, causing Will to jump and grab onto Lucas’s hand. “We thought she might be *dead* or re-captured by whoever got out of the Lab or on the run and starving and you didn’t tell us *shit* ! For *six fucking months!*”

“Well, technically,” Kali interrupted, “We’ve only been *here* for about four.”

“For the love of *fuck!*” Mike yelled. “You couldn’t have told us she was *alive*? That she was *safe*? ”

“Mike, listen to me.” Hopper said. “The Lab may be destroyed, but it’s not gone yet. Until everyone’s out of town, they’re not safe to go out-”

“That’s bullshit! You could’ve told us!” Mike yelled, looking around to the other kids for support. They were, however, staring at him a

little worriedly. “You should’ve told us! You fucking kept her from us!”

Mike jumped forwards, suddenly pushing Hopper back. The kids gasped, and Kali started forwards, only for Lucas to grab her on the arm, shaking his head. El simply stepped back a little, completely shocked.

“You stupid, lying, disgusting, piece of *shit* !” Mike yelled, screaming now. He looked like he was going to keep yelling, keep his fury going, to the point where the boys started to get worried that he was going to summon his light and attack Hopper more, but instead, he stopped, and burst into sobs.

They all stared for an instant, while Hopper slowly hugged him, saying, “It’s okay, it’s okay, kid. It’s okay.” El glanced to the others, before rushing forwards, hugging them both.

After another second, Dustin turned to Kali and said, “Uh... do you have chips, or...”

“This way.”

They all sat in Hopper’s living room again, the same place they’d sat after the attack at the Arcade. This time, El was sitting next to Mike, holding his hand. Lucas and Max sat on Mike’s other side, with the former keeping his arm around his friend, who was still crying a little and shooting Hopper odd looks. Dustin and Will sat on the floor, while Kali simply perched herself on the edge of the table, which now featured several books in the middle that might be schoolbooks of some kind.

They only sat for a few minutes, in uncomfortable silence, before Hopper walked in again, holding papers in his hand. Kali perked up at the sight, interest lighting her eyes, as Hopper read from the top.

“Kali Prasad. Subject 008. Manipulates illusions. Taken from London, England. Parents...” he trailed off, glancing sympathetically at the teenager, before handing the paper to her and reading off the next

one. “Jane Ives. Subject 011. Telekinesis and Extrasensory Perception. Taken from Indiana, US. Mother, Terry Ives-”

“El lived *here*?” Lucas asked.

Hopper glanced at him and nodded. “While she was... gone, Joyce and I went to visit her Mother. She’s basically catatonic.”

El glanced up at Hopper, her eyes narrowing slightly. Mike guessed this was new information to her.

“So, are you just gonna... keep hiding them here?” Max asked. “If the Lab’s still here...”

“Not for long.” Hopper said. “Jonathan said he could get those incriminating papers to some guy who’d release it for us, so in a few weeks, that Lab should be completely shut down. I doubt the scientists will just give up, but a lack of government protection will certainly depower them for a while. And when that happens, I believe I have enough connections to get these two into my legal custody. They won’t be able to catch up to public school, but they’ll be able to go outside and shit.”

While El seemed a little confused by the wording, she nodded a little, a small smile flickering across her face at the prospect of going into the world. Kali, however, rolled her eyes, something that informed them that this conversation had probably been brought up before. “I don’t want to stay.” Kali said, and El deflated slightly. “I’m going to find my gang.”

“I can’t exactly let a sixteen-year-old run off to join a gang God knows where.” Hopper sighed.

“I’m not *joining* them, I’m in charge.” Kali groaned. “And they *need* me.”

“You know what-” Hopper began.

“You’re a policeman.” Will interrupted.

They glanced towards him, and Hopper said, “Uh, yeah?”

“Could you... maybe try to track them?” Will said. “If they get into trouble with the police, and they file a report, you could... figure out where they are and bring them here? Try to help them like you’re helping Kal?”

Kali stared at him, considering. Hopper opened his mouth, as if to say something, but before he could, El said, “I want to fight with them.”

They all turned to her, as Mike stiffened a little. “Oh, yeah, let’s go back to that.” Hopper said. “How long have you been sneaking out?”

El hesitated, before saying, “Since I got here. I needed to see them.”

“Since you got-”

“You’ve been watching us?” Mike asked, speaking for the first time since his breakdown.

El gave him a small, weak smile, and nodded. “I couldn’t say hello. But when you fought, I watched you. Tried to help.”

Mike then said, “So, you didn’t forget us, huh?”

El looked horrified for an instant, and then Mike laughed. She smiled and laughed, too, saying, “Never.”

Then, she slowly turned to Hopper and said, “You’re letting them fight. And other people can’t recognize me. And you’ve been showing me how to fight.”

“For *emergencies*.”

“I want to help.” El said. “I want to help my *friends*.”

“Yeah, why the hell not?” Lucas said, smiling a little at El. “Just add her to the Castle Byers Training with you and Ms. Byers.”

“We need another girl in the Party.” Max shrugged.

Hopper groaned. “El, you can’t-”

“She’s been sneaking out for four fucking months.” Dustin

interrupted. “I don’t think you’d be able to stop her.”

Hopper turned to Kali, who simply shrugged. “I haven’t been able to stop her. Also, *you’re the adult.*” She said that last bit in a mocking tone, earning her a sharp glare from the Chief.

There was another pause, before Mike said, “I think I’d like to fight with El. I mean... again. She’s a badass.”

El beamed at him, and said, “*You’re* a badass.”

“Not as much as you.”

Dustin slowly turned to the others, a dark look on his face, as he said, “Actually, if they’re gonna be like *this*, maybe we should just leave El at home.”

El responded by lifting a book off the table with her mind and throwing it at him.

Mike glanced to Will, who was sitting quietly on the ground. “Will? You have an opinion?” he asked.

Will hesitated, before saying, “I think El’s really cool.” He flinched, before turning to her and adding, “I, uh, also don’t think I thanked you for breaking into the Lab for me. And talking in my head.”

El shrugged. “Friends protect each other.”

Will’s eyes lit up at the word *friend*, while Hopper sighed. “Goddamnit. I’m *not* gonna be able to stop you, am I?”

“You can try.” Mike said, as El squeezed his hand again.

Hopper gave them all another look, and then said, “I think I need to call Joyce.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Tomorrow: Last chapter for Part I, and some info on how Part II is going rn. I think it’s going to be quite fun! :D

41. Our Kids are Growing Up

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Our Kids are Growing Up

Joyce was a bit more thrilled with the idea of El joining the group than they'd assumed. She walked into the apartment, gave El a hug, and then moved over to Kali. She scanned her for a second as Kali stiffened, probably expecting another surprise hug. Joyce then smiled and said, "I... I'd like to thank you. For taking care of Will."

Kali glanced away, and shrugged, saying, "It was nothing. He was nice," as if she'd babysat him for an hour instead of helping rescue him from an evil laboratory.

Right before they left- with Joyce offering to drive everyone home to claim that they'd been hanging with Will- El pulled Mike aside.

"I missed you." she said quietly.

Mike felt his face go red, and he said, "Y-yeah. I really missed you."

"I... I know." El said, glancing down at the ground. "I could see you in... in the Void. You looked sad a lot."

"Well, that would be the trauma." Mike said, laughing a little and shrugging. "Look, I'm just... glad you're back."

El gave him a smile, and then leaned forwards, planting a quick kiss on his cheek. Mike's face somehow turned even redder, as El smirked and said. "See you soon."

After they'd all left, Kali turned to El and said, "Did you kiss him or something? Poor kid looked ready to explode." Also, it wasn't as if Kali could pretend she didn't notice his face light up like a night sky when he looked at her sister.

El shrugged, a small smile on her face.

“Damnit, El, do I have to give him the boyfriend talk?”

The younger sister looked confusedly up at her. “Boy-friend talk?”

“For fuck’s sake...”

It was day Two-Hundred and Fifty when Hopper finally gave El complete permission to go out with the kids.

Until then, she was only allowed to the training exercises at Castle Byers, and only if Kali was with her- she said something about “being grounded.” But after several weeks, Joyce and Hopper told them she could go out with the kids during missions, but *only* if she was transformed. She couldn’t be in the public eye until the Lab had completely cleared out of town.

It was around then that Mike told Nancy what was going on.

Their parents were both out- Ted for a meeting, Karen for an appointment- and Holly was asleep. Nancy had put an episode of *Mad Men*, which Mike wasn’t allowed to watch, but neither kid cared at the moment.

They were watching the TV, starting to feel a little bored, when Nancy said, “So... are we gonna talk about... stuff?”

Stuff. The Stuff they avoided talking about for- well, now it was *eight* months.

Mike took a deep breath, gripped onto the pillow he’d been hugging for a while, and then said, “Hop found El.”

There was a pause, before Nancy asked, “He found her... alive?”

“Yes.” Nancy breathed a sigh of relief. “And her sister. They’re hiding at his place now.” *Have been for six months.* “She’s gonna... go out with us sometimes.”

Nancy knew that he was a superhero. But she'd really only told him to be careful once or twice. Mike sometimes wondered if she had forgotten, or didn't give a shit, but he'd caught her giving him sympathetic looks enough times to assume that she just didn't want to talk about it. After all, the Wheeler Way of Dealing with Problems boiled down to "never mention it again."

"That's good. I'm glad she didn't get caught up in..." Nancy trailed off, staring at the screen but not really paying attention to the show anymore. "Does Jonathan know? Since, you know, his Mom's kinda in charge of you guys."

"She's *not* in charge." Mike lied. "And I don't know. Wouldn't you? I thought Jonathan was your boyfriend."

"He's not..." Nancy said, before rolling her eyes. "You're such a pain." She sighed, and then added, "But, I... I'm glad El's back."

Mike smiled a little, turning back to the screen, and he said, "Me, too."

After a second, Nancy said, "Are you ever planning on telling Mom that you've got superpowers, or-"

"*Fuck no.*"

It was Day Three-Hundred and Two when the Lab shutdown started gaining media attention.

Sure, people had been interested when it'd blown up one night and when the workers started showing up less and less frequently in town. But when files about the Lab doing inhumane experiments started being released, people became fascinated.

The story was watered down a bit- Kali and El still had their privacy that they wanted to maintain, and no matter how awful it was to think about, there were definitely some people in the world who would find a way to justify experimentation on powered children. So there was just information on illegal materials gathered in the Lab, a history of nonconsensual testing from a few decades back, and a few

“suspicions” of child abduction.

Mike heard kids at school talking about it in the halls, muttering, “Did you hear that the creepy Lab outside of town used to *kill* people?” or “My Dad heard on the news that they tortured volunteers into insanity” or “Do you think they’ve got Frankensteins in there?”, the latter of which was followed by “Cyrus, for fuck’s sake, Frankenstein was the *Doctor*, the Monster’s name was- shit, he didn’t get a name, did he?”

“If I went to school,” El said during their next practice session, upon hearing Dustin’s report of the rumors, “I could tell them I was there. I’d be popular.”

“Ooh, you wouldn’t want to do that.” Will said.

“Have you told them you were there?” Kali asked, while digging through the fridge to try and find the bottle of pop that the boys had hidden in there.

“Are you serious?” Will asked. “If they actually believe me, I’m never gonna hear the end of it. They’re already calling me ‘Zombie Boy’- apparently when I disappeared, some asshole started spreading rumors that I’d died.” He shuddered a little. “First day of school after I got back was fun.”

The Government gave no official report, but did start assuring that the “Department of Energy’s laboratories have been shut down and are no longer associated with us.”

The kids all gathered at Joyce’s house, where Dustin claimed that they were having a “celebration” due to the Lab being exposed, but it was really more of a slumber party in Will’s room, where Max made them watch the 1963 film *The Haunting* (which promptly gave Dustin nightmares, not that he would ever admit it), and El insisted on painting everyone’s fingernails bright colors.

Lucas wandered out of the room to go into the kitchen and find everyone popcorn, where he ran into Steve Harrington.

“What are you doing here?” he asked sharply.

Steve raised an eyebrow. “Hello to you, too.”

He hadn’t really talked much with the kids since the Incident- except Dustin, who he ended up tutoring- but they weren’t exactly strangers anymore.

“Seriously, why are you here?” Lucas asked.

“Picking up some stuff from Jonathan.” Steve shrugged. “I got it, so I’m leaving.”

“What stuff?”

“None of your business.” Steve passed by him, then, heading for the door, a backpack slung over his shoulder. “Have fun with your superhero shit.”

Lucas gave him a glare as he left, and then turned back to the kitchen.

It was Day Three-Hundred and Fifty-Three when the Lab was finally gone.

They were all in Castle Byers, playing “One-Word Story” and coming up with a very long narrative about dogs being the last surviving species, when Hopper and Joyce entered.

“You’re late.” Kali said, looking up from her book.

“Sorry,” Hopper said, “We had to pick up the adoption papers.”

There was a long, cold pause, and then El jumped to her feet, running to Hopper and hugging him. “It’s official?” she asked brightly.

Hopper laughed a little, handing her an envelope. “In here.”

As he moved to hand one to Kali, she asked, “So we’re allowed to go outside now?”

“Yes.” Hopper said.

“You won’t be able to catch up to public school, at least for a while.” Joyce said as El moved to hug her, too. “But now you can go places, like the Library or the Arcade-”

“I would prefer not to.” El said in reference to the last place, using a phrase that Dustin had taught her.

“Yeah! We should go to the movies to celebrate!” Max said, jumping to her feet. “What would you like, El? What do you like watching?”

“Drama.” El said.

“Like, social drama, or-”

“Romance.”

“Ah. Well, there’ll definitely be something like that.”

That night, Mike and El sat outside in the grass, watching the sky. The others were still in Castle Byers, gathering the rest of their stuff to go home, but Mike and El wanted to try and spot the stars through the forest around them.

“Mike, are you... happy?” El asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Today was great. We threw popcorn at Max, that made me feel pretty cool.” Mike laughed. “And, hey, you’re ‘Jane Hopper’ now, so-”

“I meant,” El interrupted quietly, “Are... do you still have flashbacks?”

Mike froze, shocked at the question. “Wh-what?”

“You’ve panicked a couple times. While fighting.” El said. “The first few times I watched you, and I wanted to help, but Lucas was there. Have you... still had them?”

Mike hesitated, then admitted, “Yeah, they still happen. But... not as much with my powers. We looked up some therapy shit, and Hopper

actually knew some stuff, and eventually we asked Lucas's Dad to help. He doesn't really know about all the vigilante stuff, but he's got powers, too, so..."

El leaned over, putting her head on his shoulder. He stiffened, as she said, "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"About this."

"Yeah, it's fucked up. But it's not your fault." Mike said, slowly reaching out to grab her hand. "And it's... I... I don't think it's mine, either."

They stared up at the sky for a bit, and then El said, sitting up, "Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"I want to try something."

He turned to look at her, ready to help. "Yeah? What?"

And then El leaned forwards and kissed him.

Mike froze, for a second, shock completely overwhelming him. El leaned back, a flicker of fear in her eyes. "Was that bad?" she asked.

Mike stared at her for a second, and then he broke into a grin, shook his head, and kissed her again.

It was the same night when Nancy wandered into the remains of the Lab.

Most of the larger pieces of rubble had been cleared, but there were still pieces of wall and floor and table and wire making a mess on the forest floor. She would've figured that the government would want to clean that up, but since they were already out of town for good- for now - she figured that she and her boyfriends would have to deal

with it themselves.

Jonathan had told her earlier that day. He'd called her and Steve over for "an algebra assignment", which was code for "important news."

"The Lab's gone. Hop told Will, and he just texted me." Jonathan told them.

"Are you sure?" Steve asked hesitantly.

"Well, they're gone enough that the Chief's releasing Kali and El into the wild, so..." Jonathan shrugged, rolling his eyes.

They all turned to Nancy, and she said, "And they haven't found out how their Lab got destroyed?"

Jonathan turned to his computer, where he and Steve had managed to hack into the radio station used by certain scientists. "No. Kept saying that they couldn't find the explosives."

"Good." Nancy said.

She was in the remains of the Lab now, looking for evidence she'd been there, in case somebody came back to investigate. Now that she didn't have to fear being immediately caught running around government property, she could simply crawl through the hole Lucas had left in the electric fence and kick through the rubble.

Finally, she found one of them. One of the things she'd thrown to the ground, before running away from the explosion. What the soldiers had probably been looking for for almost a year.

And she pocketed the simple rock, one she'd picked up from the path on the way to the Lab.

Well, it made sense that they wouldn't think it was what she had thrown.

She looked closer at the ground, though, spotting something else. Something that they'd accidentally left under the rubble.

She slowly picked up the paper, not knowing it was a paper from the

file that Max had picked up months before, during the attack on the Lab. One that the poor girl had forgotten about in the rush to get out, and in the months of hero-work that followed. It had completely slipped her mind. She didn't have to think about it.

Nancy wasn't so lucky.

"Mike?" she whispered.

The writing was rubbed out by dust and dirt, almost illegible, but she recognized the picture. It was a picture of Mike, from when he was maybe nine or ten. He looked lost, sad, confused.

When was this?

Then it hit her, as she saw his hospital gown.

After the accident.

She started to feel a fury bubbling inside of her. She didn't want them to have this picture of her brother at his worst moment. She couldn't believe that they *had* this. They shouldn't have taken it; the fact that this *existed* made her furious. How long had they had a file on her brother? How long had they *known*?

She crumpled the paper in her hands, and decided to let her anger take over.

The paper burst into flames.

And she dropped it onto the ground, letting it burn to ash, and walked away.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright so here's the dealio for Part II.

1) I'll either post it tomorrow or the day after. Depends on if I have access to the computer. It will be posted very soon, however.

2) It takes place ~3-4 years after Part I, so our kids

are 16 now. They've also been superhero-ing for a while. The Teens'll be in their 20s and in College (though they'll be back for the plot, don't worry!)

3) Part II will be MUCH shorter than Part I (and probably III). We'll be lucky if we get to 30 chapters on that, let alone 41!

4) Have to admit, Part II is mostly setup for Part III (the eventual crossover), and it will be a bit more mystery-oriented than Part I, which was an Origin Story. (Part III will be more of a thriller-ish thing.)

5) Can't wait to see y'all for Part II! It'll be a lot of fun (at least for me, lol).

Here's Part II: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/14069421/chapters/32413311>

Love you all! :D

- Midas